The CORNER HOUSE GIRLS GROWING UP

GRACE BROOKS HILL

83

To Marjorie
from
Cousin Jack
Christmas 1920

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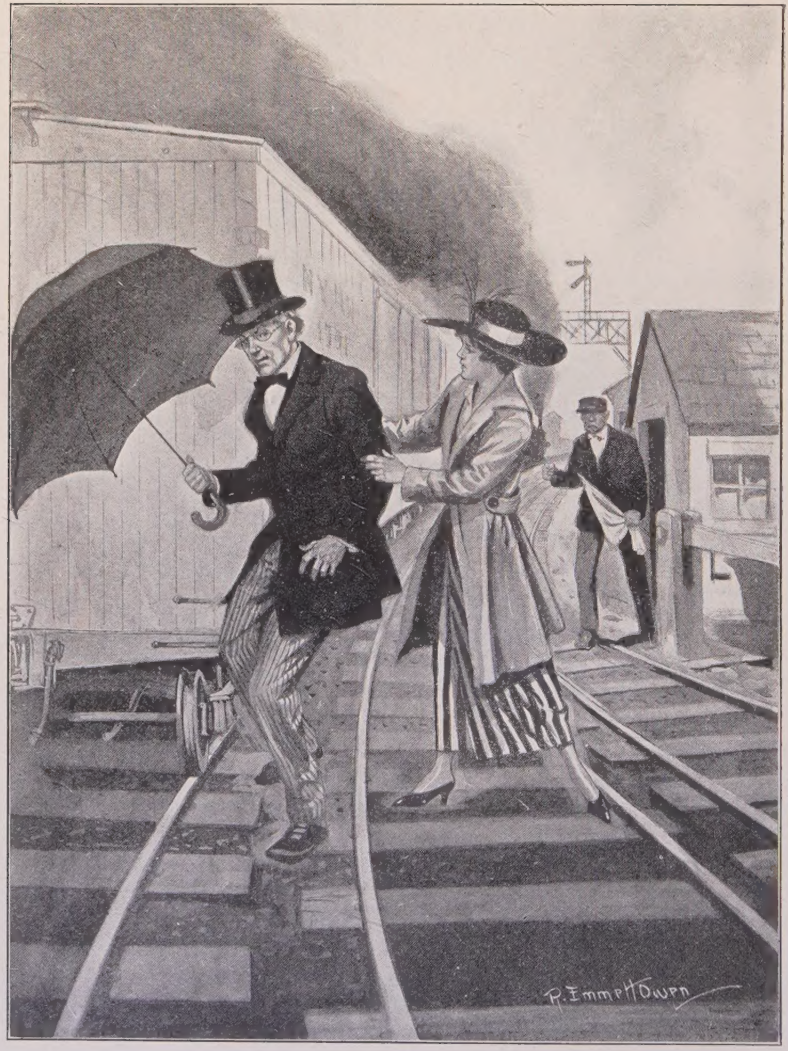

"Ruth sprang forward and seized the old gentleman's coat"
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THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS GROWING UP

WHAT HAPPENED FIRST
WHAT CAME NEXT
AND HOW IT ENDED

BY

GRACE BROOKS HILL

AUTHOR OF "THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS," "THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS UNDER CANVAS," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
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THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS AT SCHOOL
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS UNDER CANVAS
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS IN A PLAY
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS' ODD FIND
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS ON A TOUR
THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS GROWING UP

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The Corner House Girls Growing Up

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THE CORNER HOUSE GIRLS GROWING UP

CHAPTER I

ALL UP IN THE AIR

It all began because Tess Kenway became suddenly and deeply interested in aeroplanes, airships and "all sort of flying things," as Dot, the smallest Corner House girl, declared.

Perhaps one should modify that "suddenly"; for Tess had begun to think about flying—as a profession—as long ago as the winter before (and that was really a long time for a little girl of her age) when she had acted as Swiftwing the Hummingbird in the children's play of *The Carnation Countess.*

At any rate she said to Sammy Pinkney, who was almost their next door neighbor, only he lived "scatecornered" across Willow Street, that she wished she had an airship.

And there! "Scatecornered" must be explained too; it was an expression of Uncle Rufus' who was the Corner House girls' chief factotum and almost an heirloom in the family, for he had long served Uncle Peter Stower, who in dying had

willed the beautiful old homestead in Milton to his four grand-nieces.

"Just what does 'scatecornered' mean, Uncle Rufus?" asked Dot, who delighted in polysyllables.

"Why, chile, 'scatecornered' am a pufficly good word, fo' I has used it all ma life. It's—er—well, it's sort of a short-cut for de meanin' of slantindicular an crisscrosswise; w'ich means dat it ain't straight an' ain't crooked, but sort o'—er—scatecornered. Dere, chile, now you knows."

"Yes, Uncle Rufus; thank you," said Dot, polite if she did feel rather dizzy after his explanation.

But it was with Tess, who was nearly two years older than Dot and thought herself vastly more grown up, and with Sammy Pinkney this story was begun, and one should stick to one's text.

"Yes," murmured Tess, "I wish I had an airship."

Sammy looked at her, rather awed. Lately he was beginning to feel a mite awed in Tess Kenway's company, anyway. She had always been a thoughtful child. Aunt Sarah Maltby declared she was uncanny and gave her the fidgets. Of late even the boy who desired to be a pirate found Tess puzzling.

"Huh! An airship? What would you do with it? Where would you keep it?" he finally demanded, his queries being nothing if not practical.

Really Tess had not addressed him directly.

She had just audibly expressed a thought, and one that had long been in her mind in embryo. So she did not answer the neighbor boy, who was sitting beside her on the side stoop of the Corner House, rigging a self-whittled ship to sail in the horse-trough.

"You know very well it wouldn't go in the garage; and the toolshed and the henhouse—even Tom Jonah's house—are all too small. Huh! that's like a girl! Never look ahead to see what they'd do with an airship if somebody gave 'em one."

"Well, I don't s'pose anybody will," admitted Tess, with a sigh, having heard at least the last part of Sammy's speech.

"Anybody will *what?*" demanded Sammy, beginning to be somewhat confused, partly from not knowing what he himself had been saying.

"Give us an airship."

"I should say not!" ejaculated Sammy. "Why, Tess Kenway, an airship would cost 'most a million dollars!"

"Is that so?" she said, accepting Sammy's slight overestimate of the price of a flying machine quite placidly.

"And folks don't give away such presents. I should say not!" with scorn.

"Why, Neale O'Neil's Uncle Bill Sorber wants to give Dot and me a calico pony, and *that* must be worth a lot of money."

"Huh! What's a calico pony? Like one of

these Teddy bears?" sniffed Sammy. "Stuffed with cotton?"

"No it isn't, Mr. Saucebox!" broke in Agnes Kenway, the second and prettiest of the Corner House girls, who had just come out on the porch to brush her sport coat and had overheard the boy's observation. "That calico pony is well stuffed with good oats and hay if it belongs to Twomley & Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie. Neale's Uncle Bill feeds his horses till they are as fat as butter."

"Oh!" murmured Sammy. "A *real* pony?" and his eyes began to shine. He had owned a goat (it was now Tess' property) and he now possessed a bulldog. But he foresaw "larks" if the two smaller Corner House girls got a pony. The older ones often went out in the motor-car without Tess and Dot, and the suggestion of the pony may have been a roundabout way of appeasing the youngsters.

"But say!" the boy added, "why did you call it calico? That's what they make kids' dresses out of, isn't it?"

"Mine's gingham and I'm not a kid," declared Tess both promptly and with warmth.

"Aw, well, I didn't mean *you,*" explained Sammy. "And why do they call a pony 'calico'?"

This was too much for Tess and she put it up to Agnes.

"Why—now," began the older sister, "you—you know what a calico cat is, Sammy Pinkney?"

"Ye-es," Sammy said it rather doubtfully, however. "That's like Miss Pettingill's got down the street, ain't it?"

"O-o!" cried Tess. "That's *all* colors, that old cat is!"

"It's sort of mottled and patchy. That's it—patchy!" declared Agnes, seizing the suggestion of "calico" and "patchwork" to make out her case.

"But," complained Tess," I didn't think the pony would be as many colors as Miss Pettingill's cat. You know she calls *him* Rainbow."

"Why, the pony is only brown and white—or cream color," Agnes said with more confidence. "And maybe a little pink."

"Ho! ho!" snorted Sammy. "Now you are stringin' us. Who ever heard of a pink horse?"

Agnes went in without hearing this remark, and perhaps it was as well for Sammy Pinkney. Tess said severely:

"Our Agnes does not string people, Sammy. If she says the pony is pink, it *is* pink, you may be certain sure."

"And chocolate and cream color, too?" sniffed the boy. "Hum! I guess a pony as funny as that would be, could fly too. So you'll be fixed up all right, Tess Kenway."

"Dear me," sighed the little girl, coming back to their original topic of conversation. "I wish we *did* have something that would fly."

Now, secretly, Sammy was very fond of Tess.

When he had had the scarlet fever that spring and early summer, his little neighbor with the serious face and dreamy look had been the most attentive friend one could ever expect to have.

She had called morning and night at his house to get the "bulletin" of his condition; and when he was up again and the house was what Dot Kenway had mentioned as "fumigrated," Tess had spent long hours amusing the boy until he could play out of doors again.

Besides, she had much to do with his accompanying the Corner House girls on their recent motoring trip, and Sammy's own mother said that that vacation journey had "made a new boy of Sammy."

This new boy, therefore, did not scorn to put his mind to the problem of Tess Kenway's distress. But an airship!

"I say, Tess," he said at last with some eagerness, "how'd one of them airmajigs be that father brought me home from the city once—only a bigger one?"

"What is an airmajig?" demanded Tess, her curiosity aroused if nothing more.

"Well, it's a dinky thing—pshaw! you remember. You stretched a wire, and then wound it up—"

"Wound up the wire?"

"Naw! Oh, jingo! The ship, I mean. It was run by a clock. And you hung it on the wire when it was wound."

"The clock?" asked Tess, still absent-mindedly.

"Oh! Je-ru-sa-*lem!* Girls don't know nothin' about mechanics," snarled Sammy. "What's the use!"

Tess asked in an apologetic voice, after a moment of silence:

"What happened, Sammy?"

"What happened to *what?*"

"The airmajig?"

"Why, it traveled right along the wire—hanging to it, you know," explained the little boy with more enthusiasm. "It would go as far as the wire was long. Why, I bet, Tess Kenway, that it would run from your house to mine. And it wiggled its wings just like a bird. And there was a tin man in it. But pshaw! that was just for kids. It was a toy. But a bigger one—"

"Oh, Sammy! big enough to carry us?" gasped Tess, clasping her hands.

"Er—well—now," hesitated Sammy, whose own imagination was hampered by a very practical streak in his character. "That would be some airship, wouldn't it? To carry us. It would have to be pretty big, and the wire 'd have to be awful strong."

"Oh, it wouldn't be flying, then," sighed Tess.

"But say!" he exclaimed more eagerly, "couldn't we fly your dolls in it—yours and Dot's?"

"Oh!"

"That would be great!"

The screen door slammed behind them. "No," declared a serious and very decisive voice. "You sha'n't fly my Alice-doll like a kite, Sammy Pinkney. So there!"

They turned to the dark, fairy-like little girl who had appeared fresh from her afternoon toilet at the hands of Mrs. MacCall, the old Scotch housekeeper who loved the Corner House girls as though they were her own.

Dot, as usual, clung tightly to the pink-faced, fair-haired doll which of all her "children" was her favorite. The Alice-doll had been through so many adventures, and suffered such peril and disaster, that Dot could scarcely bear that she should be out of her sight for fear some new calamity would happen to her.

Therefore Dot said quite firmly:

"No, Sammy Pinkney. You're not going to fly my Alice-doll. And I should think you'd be 'shamed, Tessie Kenway, to let him even talk about it."

"Aw, who's goin' to hurt your old doll?" growled Sammy.

"She's *not* an old doll, I'd have you know, Sammy Pinkney!" responded Dot, ready to argue the point with anybody. "She's just been made over. Didn't Neale O'Neil have her taken to the hospital? And didn't they make over her face just like society ladies get *theirs* done by a der—der-ma-olywog?"

"Mercy, child!" gasped Tess. "'Dermatologist' the word is. Ruth told us."

"And they bleached her hair," concluded the excited Dot. "So there! Lots of ladies have their hair bleached. It's quite fashioningble."

"Dot! Dot!" begged the purist, Tess, "do get your words right if you will use such long ones."

Dot haughtily overlooked any such interruptions. "So," said she, "you sha'n't make a kite out of my Alice-doll," and she hugged the child to her bosom with emphasis.

"It isn't a kite," explained Tess, indulgently. "Sammy was talking about airships. He had one that had a clock in it and it flew on a wire—"

"Oo-ee!" squealed Dot suddenly. "I 'member about that, Sammy Pinkney. And your mother said you shouldn't *ever* have such a contraption in the house again. It busted the parlor lamp."

"Oh, dear! I wish you'd say 'bursted,'" sighed her sister.

"But if it had been out of doors," Sammy grumbled, "where there weren't any lamps and things, it would have worked fine. I tell you, Tess, we could string it from your house to mine, and the carrier could be loaded up at one station and unloaded and loaded again at the other. Crickey, it would be fun!"

"But maybe Ruthie wouldn't let us do it," suggested Tess, beginning to be enamored of the boy's idea, yet having her doubts about the

feasibility of the plan. "It would knock people's hats off."

"What would?" gasped Sammy.

"The wire—or the airship traveling back and forth."

"Oh, Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" again exploded Sammy. "You wanted an airship, didn't you? 'Way up in the air—not so's you can reach it from the ground. Why, we'll string the wire from my bedroom window to one of the windows of the room you and Dot sleep in."

"Oh!" cried Dot, beginning to visualize the scheme now. "Just like the cash-carriers in the Five and Ten Cent Store."

"But Ruthie wouldn't let us, I'm afraid," murmured Tess, still doubtful.

"Let's ask her," said Sammy.

"Oh, let's!" cried Dot.

But when they hunted for Ruth, the eldest of the four Corner House girls, she was not to be found on the premises; and if the children had but known it just at that time Ruth Kenway was having an adventure of her own which was, later, to prove of immense interest to all the Corner House family.

CHAPTER II

THE OLD GENTLEMAN WITH THE GREEN UMBRELLA

Nobody had ever called Ruth Kenway pretty. That was, perhaps, because her next youngest sister, Agnes, was an acknowledged beauty. Everything is comparative.

Mrs MacCall said that "handsome is as handsome does." Then, of course, in the minds of the other members of the Corner House family, Ruth was very beautiful indeed.

She had a lovely smile, and a low sweet, "mother" voice. She was, indeed, all the mother Dot had ever known; nor could Tess remember their "really-truly" mother very clearly.

Ruth had been calling on the other side of town. She went once a week without fail to have afternoon tea with Mr. Howbridge, their guardian and the administrator of the Stower estate, and this was the afternoon for that pleasant duty.

If there was anything of a serious nature to be talked over between the lawyer and the oldest Corner House girl, it was done in his pleasant library over the old silver tea service, where there were no "small pitchers with big ears."

"And so our moneys are growing, Ruth," Mr.

Howbridge said thoughtfully, having ended the discussion of some minor point of business. He admired Ruth's good sense as well as her character, and so frequently discussed matters of business with her that he was not obliged by his oath of office to do.

"In a few months we shall have considerable cash on hand in the bank; and three and a half per cent. is small interest on a large sum of money. Somehow we must invest it."

Ruth's eyes twinkled. "I suppose you really *need* our advice, Mr. Howbridge? Of course, if you left it to the Corner House girls to invest it would probably bring in only a high percentage of enjoyment.

"Agnes would have a flock of automobiles. Tessie would spend it all on making other people happy. Dot would have an entire sanitarium devoted to the treatment of dolls."

"And you, my dear?" asked the lawyer, smiling.

"Ah, if you want my advice, Mr. Howbridge, you must do as all *your* clients have to do. You must give me a retainer," and she rose, laughing, to don her light coat.

"But I will keep my mind on it," she added. "Who knows? Perhaps some wise thought may fly my way. And all that money! It will really make a fine investment."

"Remember, you girls will expect your 'dots' out of the estate some day," chuckled Mr. How-

bridge. "Your own dowry will come first, I presume, Ruth."

"Me? Get married? With the children so dependent upon me?" gasped the eldest Corner House girl. But she blushed warmly and averted her eyes from the shrewd gaze of the lawyer. "Now you are talking nonsense, Mr. Howbridge."

He let her go without comment. But to himself he murmured:

"I never knew it to fail. These girls who are determined to be spinsters are always the first to be caught in the coil of matrimony."

If Ruth's thoughts lingered upon such a ridiculous suggestion (ridiculous from her standpoint) after she left the lawyer's house, her expression of countenance did not show it. She walked cheerfully along the shaded street toward Milton's railroad station, for the old Corner House stood upon the corner of Willow and Main Streets, opposite the Parade Ground, quite on the other side of town.

She crossed the canal and was almost in sight of the station when she saw a tall figure ahead of her whose singular gait and old-fashioned manner of dress would have caused comment anywhere.

To wear a "stove-pipe" hat on a hot day like this, with a heavy, dark frock-coat and gray trousers, with his feet encased in overshoes, seemed to the casual observer rather ridiculous.

"Why," thought Ruth, "he looks as Seneca Sprague might if he were dressed up and going

to his own wedding," and she laughed to think of that ridiculous possibility regarding one of the well-known characters of Milton.

This old gentleman was a stranger to her, Ruth was sure. Milton being a junction point of two railroads, there were often strangers about the railroad station waiting for connections on one or the other of the roads. This man must be, the girl thought, such a marooned passenger.

As he reached the edge of the shade cast by the trees on Pleasant Street and stepped into the glare of the open square about the railway station, he unfurled a huge umbrella and raised it to shield himself from the sun's glare. It was a most astonishing umbrella. The upper side was a faded green; the under side an age-yellowed white.

"Why," thought Ruth, "it must be an heirloom in his family."

Amused, she continued directly behind the old gentleman as he started to cross the four tracks which blotted the center of Milton. Accidents had happened more than once at this grade crossing, and the town councilmen had been in hot water with the taxpayers for some years regarding the changing of the railroad's level.

There were drop gates, but only one decrepit watchman here at Pleasant Street. Ruth always looked both ways when she started to cross the tracks. And at this time—or about this time—in the afternoon the so-called Cannon-Ball Express

went through. That train did not even hesitate at Milton.

Quite as a matter of course, the girl halted when she came to the tracks and looked both east and west. A freight train was backing down past the station on the third track. The second track was open for passenger traffic. There was a growing roar from the west.

The old gentleman stopped and peered in that direction. He could easily have crossed ahead of the slow freight, but like Ruth he was doubtful regarding the growing clamor of the approaching express, although that fast-flier was not yet in sight at the curve.

"But it's coming!" murmured Ruth. "He mustn't cross!"

The old gentleman with the green umbrella had no intention of crossing ahead of the express; but Ruth heard him utter an impatient exclamation as he stepped back a little from proximity to the second track, the first track being merely a siding for shunted freight cars.

He was so close to the oldest Corner House girl now that she could view his countenance easily without appearing to be curious. But she was curious about the old gentleman. However, being Ruth Kenway, she would not have shown this in any way to ruffle his feelings; for, despite her own youth, Ruth had mothered her three orphaned sisters for so long that she was more sedate and thoughtful than most girls of her age.

Just at this moment the Cannon-Ball Express came tearing into view, shrieking its warning for the Pleasant Street crossing. The old gentleman was standing too near the rails, in Ruth's opinion. She involuntarily put forth her hand and seized hold of his coat. He turned to glare upon the freshly dressed, sweet-looking girl beside him with what would have been an audible grunt of disapproval had the oncoming train not made such a noise and with a look that caused her to drop her hand immediately.

His face was a marvelous network of wrinkles; he wore amber dust-goggles; his mouth was a grim slit in his brown face, like the trap of a letter-box. It did not seem possible that any one could look on Ruth Kenway's sweet face with such a grim and unkind expression on the countenance. But the man turned from her with no softening in his look.

The express was now fairly upon them. The suction of such a rapidly flying train is considerable. And that hugh umbrella made the accident unescapable.

The train shrieked by. Ruth herself felt the wind of it, and her skirts blew around her body tightly.

The blast got beneath the big umbrella, and Ruth saw the old gentleman seize hold upon the handle with both hands. The umbrella bellied and creaked. The last car whisked past, and within the cyclone of flying sand and gravel which

followed it the unfortunate old gentleman was caught.

Clinging to his umbrella, which was really the cause of all his trouble, he whirled like a dervish across the second track in the wake of the express, and stumbling, went to his knees between that set of rails and the third track, on which the freight train was backing slowly toward them.

Had he put the umbrella down he would have been all right. But his stubborn character was displayed to the full by his still gripping the unwieldy thing and, like "Old Grindstone George," hanging on to the handle. He staggered to his feet, the umbrella quite hiding the coming freight train from his view, and stumbled a pace forward, directly toward the third track.

Ruth, with a startled scream, forgetting self, ignoring the man's former scowls and harshness, sprang forward and again seized the old gentleman's coat, this time with firmness and a determination not to allow herself to be repulsed.

While Ruth Kenway is struggling to save this stranger from accident and probable death, it is a good time to turn back and give those readers who are making the acquaintance of the Corner House girls for the first time in this present volume a little sketch of who these girls are and of their adventures and pleasures as set forth in the previous volumes of this series.

In the first book of the series, entitled "The Corner House Girls," the sisters are introduced

as living in a larger city and in very poor circumstances. Their father and mother being dead, Ruth had to manage for the family on a very small pension from the Government. Aunt Sarah Maltby, who was peculiar in more ways than one, was a liability instead of an asset to the family.

This queer old woman was always expecting that a large fortune would be left to her when Mr. Peter Stower, of Milton, should die. Mr. Stower had quarreled with all his relatives. Especially had he quarreled with his half-sister Sarah. Nevertheless, Aunt Sarah believed his money and the old homestead would come to her.

Instead, Mr. Stower willed it all to the four Kenway girls, making Mr. Howbridge the administrator of the estate and the guardian of the girls. Therefore, Miss Sarah Maltby was still a pensioner on the bounty of the Corner House girls, and the fact perhaps made her more crabbed of temper than she otherwise might have been.

Having settled down in the old Corner House to live, with Mrs. MacCall as housekeeper and Uncle Rufus as man of all work, the girls next took up the matter of education, as related in "The Corner House Girls at School." The four sisters got acquainted with their new environment and made new friends and a few enemies. Particularly they became chummy with Neale O'Neil, the boy who had run away from a circus to get an education. Neale became a fixture in the neighborhood, living with Mr. Con Murphy, the

cobbler, on the street back of the Corner House. He became Agnes Kenway's particular and continual boy chum.

During the summer vacation Ruth and her sisters went to Pleasant Cove where they thoroughly enjoyed themselves and had adventures galore, as told in the third volume, entitled "The Corner House Girls Under Canvas."

As has been already mentioned, the sisters had parts in the school play *The Carnation Countess,* the following winter. Tess was Swiftwing, the Hummingbird, and Dot, a busy, busy bee, a part that the smallest Corner House girl acted to perfection. Agnes, who had a bent for theatricals, was immensely successful as Innocent Delight, and Ruth, of course, did her part well. In "The Corner House Girls in a Play," the fourth volume, these adventures and incidents are detailed.

"The Corner House Girls' Odd Find" made two of their very dearest friends wealthy, and incidentally brought to the sister what Agnes had longed for more than "anything else in the whole world"—a touring car. In that they took a long trip, as related in "The Corner House Girls on a Tour." On that journey, but recently completed, Neale O'Neil had accompanied the sisters to drive the car. Mrs. Heard, a good friend, had been their chaperon, and Sammy Pinkney, the boy who was determined to be a pirate, was what Neale termed "an excrescence on the touring party" during the exciting trip.

Ruth Kenway had been thinking of something that had occurred during their automobile trip just before spying the old gentleman with the green umbrella. She had that very day received a letter from Cecile Shepard, whom, with her brother Luke, the Corner House girls had met during their tour. And Ruth hoped that Cecile would spend a week at the old Corner House before going back in September to the preparatory school which she attended.

But now the old man's peril, her own alarm and her desire to save the stranger's life, drove all other thoughts out of the girl's mind.

CHAPTER III

THE AERIAL TRAMWAY

He might have gone right under the wheels of the backing freight train—that queer looking old gentleman—umbrella and all! Ruth Kenway dragged him back, and the train rumbled past them so near that the umbrella scraped along the sides of the box-cars.

"What under the sun's the matter with you, girl?" snapped the old man.

He turned on her so angrily, and furled the huge umbrella with such emphasis, that Ruth was quite startled, although she had thought that this time she would be prepared for any outbreak of irritation or displeasure on his part. She backed away from him, and as other people who had seen the incident came crowding about, the girl slipped away and crossed the tracks hurriedly when the freight train had gone by.

But the one-armed flagman and other railroad employees let the old gentleman understand beyond peradventure that he had barely escaped a dreadful accident. He had been about to step directly in the path of the backing freight train.

"My, my, my!" he exclaimed at last, " 'tisn't possible!"

"It just is possible!" retorted the one-armed flagman. "One minute more and you'd 've been ground to powder like as not if it hadn't been for that there girl. Some spunk, she's got."

"Some quick thinkin' she done!" exclaimed another of the employees. "Man alive, you wouldn't have no head on your shoulders right now if she hadn't knowed what to do at once and done it instanter. No siree!"

"My! my! my!" said the old gentleman again. "That girl then saved my life! Possibly saved me from a worse fate—to live on through the years maimed and mutilated."

Just then the train for which the old gentleman was waiting came in sight and soon drew up at the Milton station.

"Then I really owe that girl an apology," he went on. "Who is she? Does she live here?" he asked one of the bystanders.

"Sure she lives here."

"Well, I can't stop to-day. I've got to hurry. But I shall look her up the next time I come this way. Oh, yes indeed, I shall look her up! For a girl she certainly showed good sense."

"I don't know whether she did or not," scoffed the man to whom he spoke, but under his breath. "You don't look as though you were such a lot of use in the world, if you ask me. I bet you're a Tartar!"

Ruth Kenway, however, did not expect to be thanked. The old gentleman with the green um-

brella passed out of her mind for the time being before she reached home. And there she found the assembled young folks in the throes of a discussion regarding Tess and Sammy's proposed aerial tramway.

"*Do* call it 'tramway,'" begged Agnes. "It sounds so awfully English, don't you know!"

"It sounds so awfully foolish, don't you know," said Neale O'Neil, who had come over the fence from Mr. Con Murphy's yard and sat on the stoop regaling himself upon a summer apple he had picked on his way. "Have a summer sweetnin', Ag?"

"I do wish you would call her by her right name, Neale," said Ruth, sharply, for she did not approve of Neale's slang.

"Dear me! 'What's in a name?' to quote the Immortal Bard," drawled the youth.

"A good deal sometimes," chuckled Agnes, who did not much mind having her name shortened. "Wait till I look up in my scrap book the name of that special cheese which is made by the Swiss for use in Passion Play week. It's got all the letters of the alphabet in it *twice.*"

"Never mind looking it up," advised Ruth, quickly.

"No," said Neale. "We'll take your word for there being something in it. An odoriferous odor, I bet, if it's like most of those fancy cheeses."

"Why," said Tess, reprovingly, "I thought we were talking about my airship line."

"'Back to the mines, men! there'll be no strike to-day!'" quoted Agnes. "It's up to you, Neale. Sammy and Tess have originated the idea. All you have to do is to find the materials and do the work."

"If Ruth says we may," added Tess, without at all appreciating her sister's sarcasm.

"Why, there's no harm, I suppose. A basket to pull across the street? Does your mother say you may, Sammy?"

"Oh, yes, Ruth," declared the boy. "I just ran and asked her."

"What did she say?"

"We-ell," Sammy admitted slowly, "she was busy cutting out something on the dining-room table and her mouth was full of pins. I had to ask her two or three times before she seemed to hear me."

"And then what did she say?" insisted Ruth, with suspicion, knowing both Sammy and his mother pretty well.

"Why, she said: 'If you will only go out and stop bothering me for an hour I don't care *what* you do.' So, ain't that saying I can?" demanded Sammy.

"I should say she had given you *carte blanche*," chuckled Neale, while the older Corner House girls laughed.

"I think you may go as far as to get the wire, pulleys, and other things needed," Ruth said. "I

will ask Sammy's mother myself when she is not so strenuously engaged."

Dot listened to this and gazed after the departing older sister in something like awe.

"What is it, Dottums?" asked Agnes, chucking the little fairylike child under her soft chin.

"Oh, our Ruth does talk so beautifully," sighed the smallest Corner House girl. "What does 'strain—strain-u-ous-ly' mean, Aggie?"

"Exactly that," laughed her sister. "Mrs. Pinkney certainly was working under a 'strain.' You have hit the meaning of 'strenuously' better even than Mr. Dick."

"Who is Mr. Dick?" demanded Dot, the unappeasable.

"The man who knows everything," said Neale, throwing away the core of his apple and strolling to the gate on his way to the hardware store to purchase the materials for the aeriel tramway.

"The dictionary, goosey," said Tess in explanation to Dot. "Don't you know yet what they mean when they are joking us?"

"I only wanted to *know,*" said Dot rather grieved.

"Never mind," said Sammy, being left alone with the two smaller girls. "Let 'em laugh. We won't get mad at 'em till that wire's up and the car is running all right."

Oh, Sammy Pinkney was a practical lad.

Dot, unable long to keep any exciting happening

or interest to herself, was disseminating the news of the proposed "airship line" throughout the Corner House household. Uncle Rufus, the brown black-man, who was working just then in the garden, was vastly astonished.

"Ma 'Lantic Ocean!" he gasped. "What will dese yere chillun be doin' next, I want to know! Puttin' up a trolley line, is they, fo' airships? Who ever heard de like?"

"Oh, air-re-ro-planes!" said Dot, having heard a new word and rather liking the rolling syllables of it. "Air-re-ro-planes are getting very common, so Aggie says. There is going to be one at the County Fair. Why, people will be riding in them just like trolley cars, pretty soon!"

"Ma goodness! No!" ejaculated the old man. "I don't want to wake up on dat day when dat dere comes to pass. Lookut, chile! If de airships was a steamin' around over our haids, we'd nebber be sure of our lives. Why, dey'd be throwin' over ashes, and de cooks would be emptyin' garbage pails over de rails like dey does aboard steamships. Wouldn't be no sharks dere to gobble down de leavin's—no, ma'am! On'y birds. And folks aboard would be droppin' t'ings out'n de airship. An' w'en a man fell overboard —ma mercy, chile! he'd come down plump on you' haid, mebbe! No, ma'am, dey won't never 'low it," and the old negro snook his head seriously.

These perfectly good objections to the practicability of airship flying impressed the smallest

Corner House girl deeply. She intended to return to talk to Sammy and Tess about it; but on her way, as she came along the path next to the Willow Street fence, she suddenly saw Sammy's bandy-legged bulldog charging across the street, probably in search of his young master. The dog had slipped his chain in some way and being a ferocious-looking beast at best, it was no wonder that pedestrians gave him a wide berth.

Suddenly Dot, inside the fence, heard a stifled cry of fear outside the fence. Looking up from her Alice-doll she saw a woman clinging to the fence pickets as though she contemplated climbing the barrier to escape the dog; and the dog was standing before her wagging his stump of a tail slightly and showing two formidable rows of teeth while he "laughed" at her perturbation.

"Oh, don't be afraid of Sammy's dog," advised Dot. "He won't bite you."

"He won't bite?" demanded the woman, who was evidently of a nervous disposition. "What's he got all those teeth for? He doesn't bite?"

"Oh—oh, no, ma'am. He only nibbles."

Then she called the dog and the woman went on, relieved. But when her fright was past she probably confessed to herself that the smallest Corner House girl certainly had originality of ideas.

Dot would not let the bulldog into the yard, for he would have at once sought out Billy Bumps, the goat, to tease him. He and Billy were sworn and deadly enemies.

Sammy and Tess had disappeared. So, still feeling the necessity for discussing the airship matter with somebody, Dot went upstairs to Aunt Sarah's room.

Aunt Sarah Maltby was forever engaged in sewing or in fancy work; and, to tell the truth, Dot was not much interested in needlework. She was often seized upon by Aunt Sarah, however, and made to sit down to sew patchwork.

"Every little girl, when I was a little girl, had to learn to use her needle," declared the spinster. "When I was your age, Dorothy Kenway, I had pieced half a block bedquilt and was learning to do feather-stitching."

"Yes ma'am," said Dot, politely. "It must have been very int'resting." But she did not care for such amusement herself. On this occasion, before she could even broach the airship matter, Aunt Sarah seized upon a fault that Dot had not even noticed before.

"Look here!" exclaimed Aunt Sarah. "What have you done to your stocking?"

"I—I—I'm wearing it," confessed Dot, startled, but looking down at her neat little shins in their white hose.

"Wearing them! You're wearing them *out!*" ejaculated Aunt Sarah, pointing to a hole that Dot could not possibly see, for it was behind her. "And those stockings were put on fresh this afternoon."

"Yes, ma'am," admitted Dot, for it was of no use to argue with Aunt Sarah.

"When I was your age," (a favorite expression of Aunt Sarah's) "I darned my own stockings. And you don't even know what needles are for!"

"Oh, yes I do, please, Auntie. They're to make the talking machine play!" declared Dot, frightened by Aunt Sarah's manner into most unusual perversity. She was usually a gentle, obedient child.

Aunt Sarah was in no mood to listen to anything about airships after that; and Dot took her first lesson in darning, there and then. The old lady and the little girl came down to dinner that evening in a rather sober frame of mind, for the occasion had been wearing upon both of them.

The evening meal at the old Corner House was usually, however, a cheering event. Mrs. MacCall held sway at one end of the long table in the huge dining-room, while Aunt Sarah sat at the foot. The girls held places on either side, and if they had guests the latter were scattered between the Corner House girls and made to feel at home.

The table here was, in the truest sense, an "extension table." Uncle Rufus who, in a bobtail coat, white vest and spats, acted as butler, lengthened the table or shortened it, according to the number to be served.

Damask and bright silver and glass made the board attractive. The old-fashioned furniture as

well as the table service were the special care of the old negro. His pride and his delight were in the years he had served at the old Stower table.

When the family was alone it is a fact that Uncle Rufus considered himself privileged to join in the children's conversation. And this made the meal no less enjoyable, for Uncle Rufus added nothing, if he did not add joy, to the occasion.

"I never lets ma feelin's flow, as some folks does," he chanced to observe. "Tears don't wash a body's face nowhar's near as good as soap an' watah—no, ma'am!

"Now, dere's ma daughter, Pechunia: She'd ruther cry dan eat and at *dat* you kin see by her size she don't starb herself. She suttenly does love to attend fun'rals an' sech social gadderin's whar dey kin sit down an' tell 'bout haw good de remains was 'fore de Grim Reaper come an' reaped 'em."

Uncle Rufus sniffed. "Dat foolish brack woman! She b'longs right now to so many buryin' sassieties dat if she done gits buried by all of 'em when she dies, 'twill take more'n *one* day to hol' her fun'ral, an' dat's a fac'!

"Ya-as! Pechunia does love to mo'n. She'd a made a moughty good wife fo' Jeremiah. 'Twas so when her mammy died. I done suffered as much as any widder-man ought to t'rough her mammy dyin'. Ya-as, ma'am. But I tell you what 'tis, honey; 'tain't no use to keep

worritin' and worritin' about anyt'ing dat's done an' gone—not fo'ever.

"Her mammy was dead, an' if I'd been let, ma mind would ha' kinda chirked up a bit after a w'ile. But dat brack gal would jes' as soon break down right in de middle of dinner—ef she'd et 'nuff herse'f—an' bust out sobbin' 'bout her mammy. It got so I was prospectin' 'round fo' sumpin to t'row at her haid! I sure was.

"An' de fussin', and de mo'nin' dresses and bunnits, an' de circus-shows she had to hab to show she was properly sorry 'cause her mammy had gone. Ma soul!"

Suddenly Uncle Rufus began to chuckle his mellow chuckle and they knew the point of his story was at hand.

"She done want to write to all de rel'tives an' friends scattered about de fo'ty p'ints of the compass 'bout her mammy's bein' tuk away. Dis was a mighty fur time back, chillen; but Pechunia was jes as foolish den as she is now."

But Uncle Rufus by no means monopolized the conversation at dinner that evening. Tess was so full of the aerial tramway that she would have built it and rebuilt it forty times, so Agnes said, if they had not begged her to stop. Dot was too depressed to think of much but darning. Ruth, however, had an amusing tale to tell.

She described the queer looking old gentleman with the green umbrella and told quite energetically of the adventure at the railroad crossing.

"My dear!" exclaimed Mrs. MacCall, "you might have been hurt yourself. What a start I'd have had had I seen you. And no man would be worth your getting hurt, ma lassie."

"Quite right," croaked Aunt Sarah from the other end of the table. Her opinion of men in general coincided with Mrs. MacCall's remark. The old Corner House was a good deal of an Adamless Eden. But now Agnes suggested something that was quite sure to break up the usual order of the household arrangements.

"If you and Aunt Sarah dislike men so," she asked Mrs. MacCall, laughing, "what are you going to do when Cecile Shepard and her brother come? When will they arrive, Ruth?"

"On Monday, I expect," said the older sister. "But I am sure Aunt Sarah won't mind Luke Shepard any more than she does Neale—or Sammy."

"Who says I don't mind that Neale O'Neil?" snapped the old woman. "All boys are a nuisance. And this Shepard is nothing more than a boy, is he?"

"Oh, he's quite grown up," said Agnes. "He's entering his junior year at college."

"And he owns a tin-peddler's wagon," added Dot, as though that fact surely added to Luke Shepard's dignity and importance.

"Hoh!" sniffed Aunt Sarah, "you girls do mix up with the strangest people! I never see your beat! A tin peddler and his sister."

"But Mrs. Heard, who went with us on our motor trip, liked and approved of the Shepards," Ruth said quietly. "I think they are very plucky, too—orphans, with a very small income, and helping to pay for their education by traveling with a peddler's outfit in summer and letting the team and route out to another peddler during the winter. And Cecile is lovely."

"How about Luke?" asked Agnes slyly, and had the satisfaction of seeing her older sister blush.

Just then there was a crash on the side porch and in a moment Neale's glowing face was thrust through the pantry door.

"Eating, folks? I'll have to hustle or Mr. Con Murphy will eat my share and his own, too. There! I've brought all the hardware for that aerial tramway. It's on the porch. Let Tom Jonah watch it to-night, and we'll rig it in the morning."

CHAPTER IV

SCHOOL IN THE OFFING

Neale O'Neil, trained as an acrobat, had never lost his suppleness and skill in trapeze work and other gymnastics since leaving Twomley & Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie. There was a fine gymnasium at the Milton high school which he attended, and Neale had made his mark in the gymnasium work as well as in the studies he loved.

It was no trick at all for him to put up the wire attachments to make the aerial tramway altogether to the satisfaction of Tess and Dot and Sammy Pinkney. Before evening the following day the wire was stretched and in place, the pulleys rigged, and the wire basket, which was used as the car, was traveling back and forth briskly from the window of Sammy's bedroom to one of the windows of the large room in the east ell of the old Corner House where Tess and Dot slept and had their dolls and playthings.

With lengths of clothesline to pull the wire car back and forth, it was easy for the children to manipulate it. And the car was roomy enough and strong enough to hold almost anything they might wish to send between the two houses.

Of course, it was not exactly an airship of any

kind. But for the time Tess Kenway, who was usually modestly satisfied with what was done for her, was perfectly delighted with the arrangement.

As for Dot, she was so pleased, that she felt compelled to sit right down in the middle of the drying green beneath the wire, clasping the Alice-doll close to her breast, and gaze up at the car going back and forth as Sammy and Tess manipulated it.

"Oh! it's delightsome!" gasped the little girl, quoting one of Agnes' favorite expressions.

When Sammy came down and looked over the fence at her he said:

"Say, Dot, let's give your dolls a ride."

"Sam-my Pink-ney!" shrilled Dot vigorously. "If you ever try to ride my Alice-doll or any of her sisters in that car up there I'll—I'll never speak to you again!"

And she was so much in earnest and seemed so near to tears that Sammy hastily gave his word of honor—as a man and a pirate—never to treat the dolls to such an aerial trip.

Mabel Creamer, who lived next door on Main Street, wheeled her little brother over to Willow Street to view the wonder of the aerial tramway. When she heard that Dot and Tess would not allow their dolls to be used as passengers in the aerial car, she offered to put Bubby up there.

"Why, Mabel!" gasped Tess. "S'pose he should fall out?"

"Oh," Mabel replied coolly, "he wouldn't hurt himself. He rolled all the way down the cellar stairs yesterday and didn't do a thing to himself —only broke the cat's dish, 'cause he landed on it."

"That's some tough baby," pronounced Neale; but after Mabel had wheeled Bubby away Tess confided to Neale that she knew why the Creamer's youngest was so "tough."

"Why, you know," Tess said earnestly, "almost everything that could happen to a baby has happened to him. Mabel hates to take care of him, and she is always forgetting and leaving him to tumble out of the carriage, or into something babies aren't supposed to get into."

"And 'member when he got carried away in the hamper by the laundryman?" broke in Dot. "If it hadn't been for our Agnes following in Joe Eldred's motor car, Bubby might have been washed and ironed and brought back to Mrs. Creamer just as flat as a pancake!"

"That's the capsheaf," chuckled Neale O'Neil. "Bubby Creamer is certainly a wonderful kid. What do you say, Aggie?" for the older girl had just appeared, ready dressed for a shopping excursion.

"Silk-wool to mend my sweater; pins—two kinds; pearl buttons for Dot's waists; a celluloid thimble for Linda; a pair of hose for Mrs. Mac —extra tops; Aunt Sarah's peppermints for Sunday service; lace for Ruthie's collar; hair ribbons

for Tessie; a *love* of a waist I saw at Blackstein & Mape's! and——"

"Help! Help!" cried Neale, breaking in at last. "And you expect *me* to accompany you on a shopping trip, Aggie, when you've all those feminine folderols to buy?

"Why not?" demanded Agnes, making innocent eyes. "I want you to carry my packages."

"All right. But you'll hitch me out in front of the store to a hitching post like any other beast of burden," returned Neale, following in her footsteps out of the side gate.

This was a Saturday. Ruth had said that if they were to have company all the following week and school was to open a week from Monday, they had all better get out their school books on this evening and begin to get familiar with the studies they were to go back to so soon.

"At least, we would better see if we all remember our A B C's," she said dryly. "You, Sammy, after being out so long last term because of the scarlet fever, will have to make up some studies if you wish to keep up with your class."

"Don't care whether I keep up or not," growled Sammy. "I just hate school. Every time I think of it I feel like going right off and being a pirate, without waiting to learn navigation."

For Mr. Pinkney, who was a very wise man, had explained to Sammy that there was scarcely any use in his thinking of being a pirate if he could not navigate a ship. And navigation, he

further explained, was a form of mathematics that could only be studied after one had graduated from high school and knew all about algebra.

Nevertheless, Sammy appreciated the fact that he was included in Ruth's invitation and could bring his books over to the Corner House sitting-room where the girls and Neale O'Neil were wont to study almost every week-day night during the school year.

Neale usually took supper at the Corner House on Saturday evenings and, considering the way he came back from the shopping expedition laden with bundles, he certainly deserved something for "the inner man," as he himself expressed it. A truly New England Saturday night supper was almost always served by Mrs. MacCall—baked beans, brown bread and codfish cakes.

And pudding! Mrs. MacCall was famous for her "whangdoodle pudding and lallygag sauce" —a title she had given once to cottage pudding and its accompanying dressing to satisfy little folks' teasing questions as to "what is *that?*" Neale O'Neil was very fond of this delicacy.

As he passed his plate for a second helping on this occasion he quoted with becoming reverence: "The woman that maketh a good pudding is better than a tart reply."

"But Mrs. Adams made a tart once," observed Dot seriously, "and instead of sifting powdered sugar on it she got hold of her sand-shaker, and when she gave Margaret Pease and me each a

piece it gritted our teeth so we couldn't eat it. So then," concluded Dot, "she found out what she had done."

"If she'd given it to Sammy Pinkney," Tess said moroscly, "I guess he'd have eaten it right down and never said a word. I saw him drop his bread and butter and 'lasses on the ground once, and he picked it right up and ate it. He said the ground was clean!"

"No wonder Sammy's such a gritty little chap," chuckled Neale.

"Well," Mrs. MacCall said cheerfully, and with her usual optimism, "it's an old saying that everybody has to eat a peck of dirt before he dies."

"So 'tis, Mrs. MacCall," Aunt Sarah rejoined from her end of the table, and with a scornful sniff. "But I want to know whose dirt I'm eating. That Sammy Pinkney is nothing but a little animal."

This puzzled Dot somewhat, and she whispered to Ruth: "Ruthie, are *good* little boys, then, vegetables?"

"No, dear," the elder sister said, smiling while the others laughed. "Both bad little boys and good little boys, as well as girls, are human beings."

"And," said Tess soberly, trying to recall something she had learned in the past, "there isn't any difference between bad girls and bad boys, only the boys are of the male sex and the girls are of the feline sex."

At that statement there was a burst of laughter.

"You certainly said something that time, Tess," declared Neale. "For if there is anything more feline than a girl that's mad—"

"Nothing like that, Neale O'Neil," interrupted Agnes quickly. "You would better sing pretty small, young man. Remember you are outnumbered."

"Yes," said Tess sedately, "you haven't even Sammy here now to take your part, you know, Neale."

"True for you, Tessie," agreed Neale. "I am in an infinitesimal minority."

Dot's eyes opened wide as these long words sounded from the boy's lips, and she gulped just as though she were swallowing them down for digestion. Agnes' eyes twinkled as she asked the smallest girl:

"Did you get those two, honey?"

"Don't make fun of her," admonished Ruth, aside.

"Well," sighed Dot, soberly, "I do hope I'll get into big words in the reading book this next term. I love 'em. Why! Tess is awfully far ahead of me; she can spell words in four cylinders!"

And that closed the evening meal with a round of laughter that Dot did not understand.

CHAPTER V

THE SHEPARDS

"Just think!" Agnes said to Ruth. "For the first time since we came to live at the old Corner House and call it our owniest own, we are going to have real visitors. Oh, dear, me, Ruth, I wish we could have week-end parties, and dances, and all sorts of society things. I do!"

"Mercy, Agnes! And you with your hair in plaits?"

"Whose fault is that, I'd like to know," responded the beauty a bit sharply. "I'm the only girl in my set who doesn't put her hair up. Myra Stetson has worn hers up for a year—"

"She keeps house for her father and has not attended school for six months," Ruth reminded her.

"Well, Eva Larry puts hers up when her mother has company. And Pearl Howard—"

"Never mind the catalog of your friends, dear," put in Ruth, quietly. "We know you are a much abused little girl. But your hair in plaits you'd better wear for a while yet.

"As for week-end parties and the like, I will speak to Mr. Howbridge and perhaps we can give some parties this winter."

"With the kids in them!" grumbled Agnes. "I want real grown-up parties."

"Let us wait till we are really grown up for them," and the elder sister laughed.

"Goodness! you are grown up enough, Ruth Kenway," Agnes declared. "You might be married at your age. Mrs. Mac says she was."

"Hush!" exclaimed Ruth, almost shocked by such a suggestion. "You do get the most peculiar ideas in your head, Aggie."

"There's nothing peculiar about marrying," said the other girl saucily. "I'm sure everybody's 'doing it.' It's quite the proper thing. You know, as the smallest member of the catechism class replied to the question: 'What is the chief end of woman?' 'Marriage!' And 'tis, too," concluded the positive Agnes.

"Do talk sensibly. But to return. Cecile and her brother visiting us is really the first time we'll have entertained guests—save Mrs. Treble and—"

"Oh, Mrs. Trouble and Double Trouble, or Barnabetta Scruggs and her father, don't count," Agnes hastened to say. "*They* were only people we took in. But the Shepards are real guests. And I'm so glad you decided upon giving them two of the big front rooms, Ruthie. Those guest rooms that Uncle Peter had shut up for so many years are just beautiful. There aren't such great rooms, or such splendid old furniture in Milton, as we have."

"We have much to be thankful for," said Ruth placidly.

"We've a lot to be proud of," amended Agnes. "And our auto! My! Think of us poor little miserable Kenways cutting such a dash."

"And yet you were just now longing for more nice things," pointed out Ruth.

"That's my fatal ambition," sighed her sister. "I am a female—No! A *feline*—as Tess says—Napoleon. I long for more worlds to conquer like Alexander. I dream of great things like Sir Humphrey Davy and Newton. I—"

"Do be feminine in your comparisons, if not feline," suggested Ruth, laughing. "Speak of great women, not of great men."

"Oh, indeed! Why, pray? Boadicea? Queen Elizabeth? Joan of Arc—"

"Oh I know who *she* was," declared Dot, who had been listening, open-eyed and open-mouthed, to this harangue of the volatile sister. "She was Noah's wife—and he built a big boat, and put horses and bears and pigs and goats on it so they wouldn't be drowned—and dogs and cats. And they were fruitful and multiplied and filled the earth—"

"Oh, oh, oh!" shrieked Agnes. "That child will be the death of me! Where does she pick up her knowledge of scriptural history?"

"I guess," said Ruth, kissing the pouting lips of Dot, who did not always take kindly to being laughed at, "that our old Sandyface must have

been one of those cats Noah had. She has found four more little blind kittens somewhere. And what we shall do about it, I do not know."

Dot and Tess ran squealing to the shed to see the new members of the Corner House family, while Neale said, chuckling:

"It's a regular *cat*astrophe, isn't it? Better fill the motor car with feline creatures and let Aggie and me chase around through the country, dropping cats at farmers' barns."

"Never!" proclaimed Agnes. "We mean to keep on good terms with all the farmers about Milton. We can't have them coming out and stopping us when we go by and demanding pay for all the hens you run over, Neale O'Neil."

"Never yet ran over but one hen," declared the boy quickly. "And she was an old cluck hen—the farmer said so. He thought he really ought to pay me for killing her. And she made soup at that."

"Come, come, come, children!" admonished Ruth. "Let us get out the books and see if we have quite forgotten everything we ever knew."

They gathered around the sitting-room lamp, Sammy Pinkney having appeared. Mrs. MacCall joined them with her mending, as she loved to do in the evenings. And the Corner House study hour was inaugurated for the fall with appropriate ceremonies of baked apples on the stove and a heaping plate of popcorn in the middle of the table.

"I can study so much better when I'm chewing something," Agnes admitted.

Dot was soon nodding and Mrs. MacCall from her low rocking chair observed:

"I think little folks had better go to bed with the chickens—eh, my lassie?"

"No, Mrs. Mac; I don't want to," complained the sleepy Dot. "I've got a bed of my own."

"I'll go with her," said Tess, knowing that her little sister did not like to retire alone, even if she might object to the company of chickens.

Really, none of them studied much on this evening; but they had a happy time. All, possibly, save Sammy. The thought of going to school once again made that embryo pirate very despondent.

" 'Tain't that I wouldn't like to go with the fellers, and play at recess, and hear the organ play in the big hall, and spin tops on the basement play-room floor, and all *that,*" grumbled Sammy. "But they do try to learn us such perfectly silly things."

"What silly things?" demanded Agnes with amusement.

"Why, all 'bout 'rithmetic. Huh! Can't a feller count on his fingers? What were they given us for, I'd like to know?" demanded this youthful philosopher.

"Ow! ow!" murmured Neale, vastly amused.

"Huh!" went on Sammy. "Last teacher I had —mine and Tessie's—was all the time learning

us maxims, and what things meant; like *love*, and *charity* and *happiness*. She was so silly, she was!

"That Iky Goronofsky is the thick one," added Sammy, with a grin of recollection. "When she was trying to make us kids understand the difference between the meaning of those three words he couldn't get it into his head. So she gave him three buttons, one for love, one for charity and one for happiness, and made him take 'em home to study."

"What did he do with them?" asked Neale, interested.

"Why, when she asked Iky the next time about love, charity and happiness, he didn't know any more than he did before," said Sammy, with disgust. 'Where's your buttons, Iky?' she asks him, and Iky hauls out two of 'em.

"'There's love, Miss Shipman, and there's charity,' says Iky, 'but my mother sewed happiness on my waist this morning.' Did you ever hear of such a dunce as that kid?" concluded Sammy, with disgust.

Sunday was always a busy day, if a quiet one, at the old Corner House. Everything had been done to prepare for the expected guests; but several times Agnes had to enter the two big rooms which were to be devoted to the use of Cecile Shepard and her brother, just for the sake of making sure that all was right and ready.

In just what style the Shepards lived Agnes did

not know. That they were very well-mannered and were plainly used to what is really essential to cultivated people, the Corner House girls were sure.

The visitors were not wealthy, however; far from it. They had but a single relative—a maiden aunt—and with her they made their home when they were not at school or off on peddling trips with a van and team of horses.

Cecile and Luke arrived before noon on Monday. Neale drove Ruth and Agnes down to the station in the car to meet the visitors.

"Oh, this is just scrumptious!" the second sister declared, with a sigh. "To think that the Kenways would ever arrive at the point where they can drive to the station in their own car for guests—"

"Oh, squash!" ejaculated Neale, with disgust. "She's getting to be what Uncle Rufus calls uppity. There'll be no living in the same town with my Lady pretty soon."

"It is all right," Ruth said seriously, for she did not approve of Neale any more than she could help—that was not her policy with boys. "It is perfectly proper to be glad that our circumstances have improved."

"Oh, crickey!" snorted Neale. "You girls have got up in the world, that's a fact. But I've come down. Uncle Bill Sorber wanted me to be a ground and lofty tumbler."

The sisters laughed, and what might have been

a bit of friction was escaped. Even Ruth had to admit that the ex-circus boy was the best-natured person they knew.

Well, the Shepards arrived. Cecile and Luke were just as glad to see Neale as they were to see the Corner House girls.

Luke, sitting in the seat beside Neale on the way up town, whispered to him: "Isn't she sweeter than ever? I declare! I never knew so nice a girl."

"Huh?" grunted Neale, and glared at his companion for a moment, forgetting that a chauffeur should keep both eyes on his business when running a car in a crowded street.

"Say! were you trying to climb into that coal cart or only fooling?" gasped Luke, who although several years older than Neale had none of his experience as an automobile driver.

"What did you say?" asked Neale, with his eyes looking ahead again.

"Were you trying to get into that coal cart or—"

"Aw, no! About Aggie Kenway."

"Why—why I didn't say anything about her," Luke replied. "Oh! I spoke of Miss Ruth. Isn't she a splendid girl?"

"Oh! Yes! Ruth! Some!" was the way Neale agreed with this statement of the visitor.

CHAPTER VI

NAMING THE NEW BABY

Luke Shepard was a very friendly person who was bound to make himself beloved by the entire Corner House family. Unless, perhaps, Aunt Sarah Maltby refused to melt before the sunshine of his smile. He was a handsome fellow, too—curly brown hair, a good brown and red complexion, well chiseled features, brown eyes set wide apart, and lips that laughed above a well molded and firm-looking chin.

Cecile was his antithesis—sprightly and small-framed, roguish of look and behavior, without an iota of hoidenishness about her. She was inordinately fond of her brother, and she could not understand how the Corner House girls had managed to get on so many years without one boy, at least, in the family.

"Of course, you've got Neale," she said to Ruth and Agnes after they had reached the house.

"And there's Sammy Pinkney," Tess put in gravely. "I'm sure he's quite as much trouble to us as a real brother could be."

At this there was a burst of uncontrollable laughter.

The little girls were fond of Luke Shepard, however. He had been very nice to them on

that adventurous occasion when they had met him and his sister on the automobile tour; and on coming to the old Corner House for this visit he had not forgotten Tess and Dot. To the former he had brought a lovely, imaginative, beautifully bound story book, "full of gods and gondolas," Dot said with awe.

To Dot herself he most tactfully presented a doll. Not a doll to take the place in any way of the beloved Alice-doll. No. Luke was too wise a youth for that. But it was a new baby nevertheless that Dot was bound to be proud of.

"Oh," cried Tess, "a boy baby, Dot! And you never had a real boy baby before!"

"Or such a nice looking one, at any rate," Agnes suggested.

Dot, smiling "big," clasped the manly looking little manikin in its neat sailor suit and cap. She really was too pleased for speech for a minute or two. Then she said:

"I'm real glad you came to see us, Mr. Luke. I was glad before. Now I'm glad *twice*."

"You can't beat that kid," said Neale admiringly.

But the arrival of the new doll-baby put upon the smaller Corner House girls—especially upon Dot—a duty that was always taken seriously. The naming of either new dolls or new pets usually needed the heedful attention of the entire Corner House family.

The children of Sandyface, and her grand-

children, were usually an enormous care upon the little girls in this way. To name so many cats, and name them appropriately, had been in the past a matter of no little moment.

Now that Sandyface had found four more eyeless, mewing little mites, only the coming of the sailor-baby, as Dot called Luke Shepard's present, made the two little girls agree to Neale's suggestion regarding the naming of the new kittens.

They were christened briefly and succinctly: "One, Two, Three and Four."

"For we really are too busy, and company in the house, too," said Tess earnestly, "to worry over Sandyface's new family. She *might* have waited until some other time to find those kittens."

On that first evening of the Shepards' visit there was much ado about the name for the baby. The whole family took more or less interest in it, and suggestions galore were showered upon the anxious young mother regarding the sailor-baby.

Neale suggested that a ballot-box be arranged and that everybody write his suggestions upon slips of paper and deposit them in the box. Then Dot might be allowed to put in her hand, mix up the slips, and draw one. That name must be the sailor-baby's cognomen.

But there was too great a hazard in this to attract the smallest Corner House girl; for Aunt Sarah had already gravely suggested Zerubbabel.

"And suppose," Dot whispered, "she should write that on a paper (do you s'pose such an ugly name can be spelled?) and I should draw that out first thing! Why, a name like that would—would make an invalid of the poor child all his life!"

Therefore when, on Tuesday, the Corner House girls and their guests went for a ride in the automobile, the momentous decision regarding the new baby's name was still to be made.

There was no room for Sammy in the car on this occasion, and he was left behind to seek his own amusement with the aerial tramway. And as matters turned out he certainly was busy with that arrangement before the automobile party returned.

However, even Tess forgot all things aerial in the enjoyment of the ride. The car ran smoothly, the day was fine, and not even a "cluck hen" crossed their path. So there was not the smallest thing to mar their pleasure.

Luke rode in front with Neale; and the three older girls were so much interested in their own chatter that they scarcely thought of Tess and Dot. But they, too, were exceedingly busy with their particular affairs.

What interested them most of all through the drive was the naming of the sailor-baby. Dot sat with the Alice-doll in her arms, of course; but the new doll was hugged up very close to her side upon the seat.

"He is really a very pretty doll for a boy doll," Tess observed. "You really should have a very pretty name for him."

"I know," agreed the anxious mother. "But all the nice names seem to have been used up. Wha—what do you think of 'Brandywine,' Tessie?"

"Goodness! The name of that avenue we just passed? Why, Dot!" ejaculated the horrified older sister. "That's a *nawful* name! And we're temp'rance."

"Yes. It is kind of liquorish, I s'pose," admitted Dot. "But it sounds different. Tom, and Edgar, and Wilfred, and Feodor, and St. John, and Clarence, and Montmorency, and Peter, and Henry, and Vanscombe, and Michael, and all those others, have been used over and over again in naming babies," Dot said with seriousness. "You know we've heard of somebody, or know somebody, named by all of those names. Oh, Tess!" she ejaculated suddenly, "look there!"

The automobile party were just passing Mr. Stout's big tobacco barn. One leaf of the main door was open and hooked back and Dot was pointing eagerly to some large black letters painted upon the inside of this door.

"What a pretty name that is!" she whispered to Tess, excitedly. "'Nosmo'! Did you ever hear of it before?"

"No-o, Dottie, I never did," her sister agreed

slowly. "'Nosmo' sounds kind of funny, doesn't it? I—I never heard of a boy called that."

"Well, Tess Kenway!" cried her little sister indignantly, "isn't that just what we want? A boy's name that hasn't ever been used on a boy before?"

"That's so, Dottie," agreed the more cautious Tess. "That *is* so. No boy has had it and spoiled it by being bad." Tess' opinion of the genus boy was governed largely by the attitude Ruth seemed to hold toward all boyhood.

"It's brand new," declared Dot, christening the sailor-baby on the spot, and without bell, book, or candle. "Nosmo Kenway. Isn't that nice? He's so cute, too!" and she seized the new doll and pressed her red lips to the sailor-boy's highly flushed cheek.

"Nosmo Kenway," murmured Tess. "Oughtn't he to have a middle name?"

"Oh, well," said Dot. "We can give him that afterward—if we find a good one. But middle names don't really count, after all."

The merry party of automobilists ran out as far as Mr. Bob Buckham's—the strawberry man, as they called him—a very good friend of theirs. Mrs. Buckham was confined to her chair and the Corner House girls always took her flowers or something nice when they called at the farm-house.

The Kenways and Neale went in to see the

invalid for a minute, leaving Cecile and Luke Shepard alone in the car. The keen-eyed girl suddenly leaned forward and tapped her brother on the arm.

"Hul-lo!" he said, waking from a day-dream.

"Penny for your thoughts, Luke?" she suggested.

"Worth more than that, Sis."

"I know. They were about Ruth Kenway," and Cecile laughed, although her eyes were anxious.

"Witch!" exclaimed Luke, flushing a little.

"Beware, young man!" his sister said, shaking an admonitory finger.

"Beware of the dog?" queried Luke with a smile.

"Just so, Boy. There is a dog. A big one in the path."

"Why, Sis, I don't believe Ruth Kenway has ever even *thought* of a boy—"

"As you are thinking of her?" his sister broke in softly. "No. I think she is perfectly 'heart whole and fancy free.' And so ought you to be. Luke."

"Well, she's such a sweet girl," he declared, his eyes shining.

"She certainly is."

"Then what have you against my—my liking her?"

"There is nothing I'd like better in this world,

Luke," his sister declared earnestly, "than to see you happy in the friendship of such a girl as Ruth."

"Then—"

"Remember Neighbor," Cecile said, earnestly.

"Oh, bother Neighbor!" muttered Luke.

"No. You would not like to see him bothered. And he is a very good friend of yours. He can and will help you get a start in the world after you have finished at college. His aid may mean ten years' advantage to you."

"Do you suppose I care what Neighbor does with his money?" demanded Luke, hotly.

"No. Not for just what the money would bring you," she agreed. "But think! What have you to offer Ruth Kenway if you should come to the point where you might ask her to engage herself to you? We're just as poor as Job's turkey after it was picked to the bones!"

"I know it, Sis," groaned the young fellow.

"And without Neighbor's help you may have a long and hard struggle getting anywhere," Cecile said gravely.

"Too true, Sis."

"Well—then—"

The Kenways and Neale O'Neil reappeared. The visiting brother fell silent. Luke Shepard scarcely had a word to say during the remainder of the automobile ride.

CHAPTER VII

A FELINE FUROR

Returning to town, the automobile party passed Stout's tobacco barn again and when it came in sight Dot eagerly began to explain to the older girls how and where she had found a name for the sailor-baby that Luke Shepard had given her.

"That is a real pretty name I think," said Ruth, absently. "And quite new I am sure."

Agnes demanded again where the smallest Corner House girl had seen the name, 'Nosmo' painted. "Why!" she exclaimed, "it says 'king'—that's what is painted on that door, children."

"Oh, but, Sister!" exclaimed Tess. "*That* is the other half of the big door. They've shut the half that was open when we rode along before and opened the other one." But Agnes was not listening to this explanation. She had turned back to Ruth and Cecile.

Dot was eagerly repeating something over and over to herself. Tess turned to demand what it was.

"Oh, Tessie!" the smallest Corner House girl cried, "that sounds b-e-a-u-ti-ful!"

"What does?" demanded her sister.

"I've just the nicest middle name for this sailor-baby," and she hugged her new possession again.

"What is it?" asked the interested Tess.

"Nosmo King Kenway. Isn't that nice?" eagerly cried the little girl. "It's—it's so 'risto-cratic. Don't you think so, Tess?"

Tess repeated the full name, too. It did sound rather nice. The oftener you said it the better it sounded. And—yet—there was something a wee bit peculiar about it. But Tess was too kind hearted to suggest anything wrong with the name, as long as Dot liked it so much. And she had found it all her very own self!

"I wonder what Sammy will say to *that*," murmured Dot placidly. "I guess he'll think it is a nice name, won't he?"

"Well, if he doesn't it won't make any difference," Tess said loftily.

Just at that time, however, (though quite unsuspected by the Corner House girls) Sammy Pinkney had his mind quite filled with other and more important matters.

Since his long illness in the spring Sammy had remained something of a stranger to his old-time boy friends. Of course, as soon as he got into school again and associated with the boys of his own class once more, he would get back into the "gang" as he called it. He was not a boy to be gibed because he played with girls so much.

However, habit brought him to the side gate of the Corner House on this afternoon, whether the little girls were at home or not. He was so often in and out of the house that neither Mrs. MacCall nor Linda paid much attention to him; for although Sammy Pinkney was as "full of mischief as a chestnut is of meat" (to quote Mrs. MacCall) he never touched anything about the house that was not his, nor wandered into the rooms upstairs, save the one from the window of which the aerial tramway was strung to the window of his own bedroom "scatecornered" across Willow Street.

His aim was the window of the little girls' big playing and sleeping room now, for the wire basket chanced to be fastened at this end of the line. He had it in his mind to pull the basket over to his own house, fill it there with some sort of cargo, and draw it back and forth, amusing himself by imagining that he was loading a ship from the dock.

"Or, maybe," Sammy ruminated, "I'll have the old ship wrecked, and the lifesavers will put out the life buoy; and we'll bring the passengers ashore. Crickey! that'll be just the thing. I'll save 'em all from drownin'—that's what I'll do!"

Then he looked about in some anxiety for the wrecked passengers of the foundered steamship which he immediately imagined was cast on the reef just about as far from the Corner House as his own domicile stood.

"Got to have passengers!" cried Sammy. "Oh, crickey! the dolls would be just the thing. But I promised I wouldn't touch them. Aw, pshaw! a feller can't have much fun after all where there's a lot of girls around."

Not that the girls were here to bother Sammy Pinkney now; but he felt the oppressive effect of Dot's mandatory decree.

"If a fellow had *forty* dolls he wouldn't be afraid to give them a ride on this aerial tramway!"

Wandering downstairs again and out upon the side porch he found Sandyface lying in the sun, but within sight and hearing of the four new blind babies which were nested upon Uncle Rufus' old coat just within the shed door.

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" gasped Sammy, his eyes big with a sudden idea.

He knelt down beside the little soft balls of fur, and Sandyface came to rub around him and worship likewise. But she had no idea of the thought that ran riot in Sammy's head.

"Say! they'd never know they was disturbed," muttered the boy.

He gathered up the old coat, with the four little mites in it, and started stealthily for the back stairs. Sandyface, not at all disturbed in her mind, followed, purring, but with no intention of quite losing sight of her babies. The little girls were in the habit of carrying her

progeny all about the place and always brought them back in safety.

Sammy stole up the stairs on tiptoe. He knew very well he was up to mischief and he did not wish to meet Mrs. MacCall, or even Linda. For the Finnish girl who helped the housekeeper had her private opinion of Sammy Pinkney—and often expressed it publicly.

"If I haf a boy brudder like him, I sew him up in a bag—oh, yes!" was one of the mildest threats that Linda ever made regarding Sammy.

Sammy pushed up the screen and placed the coat, with the four kittens asleep on it, carefully in the deep wire basket. Sandyface, interested, leaped upon the window sill, and smelled of the kittens and the basket. Then she craned her neck to look down to the ground.

"You'd better not jump, cat," warned Sammy, unfastening the rope that ran through blocks at both ends and so enabled one to pull the basket back and forth. "It's a long way to the ground."

Sandyface had no such silly idea in her wise old head. As Sammy turned away for a moment she stepped gingerly into the basket, moved the squirming kittens over, and settled down to nurse them. A little thing like being twenty feet or so up in the air with her babies did not disturb Sandyface—much.

"Hey, you!" exclaimed Sammy, grabbing the old cat away before the snuffling little kittens had

really found she was with them. "Can't take the whole crew and all the passengers off the wreck at once. You'll overload the lifecar. Scat!" and he put her down upon the floor.

But the kittens began to whine now; they were being cheated, they thought, and they desired their mother very much. Sandyface replied to them and jumped upon the window sill again.

"Hey!" Sammy said, "didn't I tell you to wait till the next load? Aw! look at that cat!"

For the mother cat had stepped into the basket again, purring, and once more settled down.

"All right, then," ejaculated Sammy in disgust, "if you're bound to go along! But don't blame *me* if you're so heavy that the old carrier busts."

He carefully drew the basket out upon the wire, away from the house. Sandyface lifted her head; but as she was very comfortable and had her family with her, she made no great objection as the basket swung out into space.

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" gasped Sammy, with fearful joy. "Bet that old basket would hold all the other cats too. Wish I had the bunch of 'em—Spotty, and Almira, and Popocatepetl, and Bungle, and Starboard, Port, Hard-a-Lee and Main-sheet! And Almira's got four kittens of her own somewhere. And so's Popocatepetl. Whew! that makes—makes—"

But Sammy did not like arithmetic enough

to figure up this sum; and he did not seem to have fingers enough just then to count them. So he gave it up. A cat and four kittens swinging out over Willow Street, with all the winds of heaven blowing about them, should have satisfied even Sammy Pinkney.

The boy pulled the basket cautiously to the extreme end of the wire—until the carrier bumped against the clapboards under his own bedroom window. He saw Sandyface raise her head again and glare around. Half asleep until this time she had not realized that she and her babies were being so marvelously transported from their own home to the cottage where Sammy resided.

"Crickey!" exclaimed the boy suddenly. "If mother comes out and sees 'em—or if that there bulldog Buster hears those cats meowing, there'll be trouble over there."

He started anxiously to draw the cats and the carrier back to the Corner House. In some way the line by which he drew the basket became fouled at the other end; or the pulleys on the wire became chocked. Sammy could not tell just what the trouble was, anyway.

But to his dismay the basket stuck midway of the line. High over the middle of Willow Street it stopped, and Sandyface was now standing up and telling the neighborhood just how scared she felt for her babies and herself.

"Lie down, cat!" the perturbed Sammy cried to her. "You'll fall overboard and drown—I mean, break your silly neck! S-st! Lie down!"

Tom Jonah, the old house dog, appeared suddenly below and began to bark. Billy Bumps came galloping around the house, shook his horns in disapproval, and "bla-ated" loudly.

Linda came to the kitchen door, beheld the cat in the basket high on the wire, and seemed to understand the cause of the trouble with uncanny certainty.

"That iss the Pinkney boy!" she cried. "If he was *my* brudder—"

Mrs. MacCall, called by the clatter, ran out. Aunt Sarah Maltby, even, appeared at the door, while Uncle Rufus limped up from the hen houses mildly demanding:

"What's done happen' to dem cats? Don't I hear dem prognosticatin' about, somewhar's?"

"Sammy Pinkney!" cried Mrs. MacCall, the first to spy the boy at the window of the little girls' playroom, "what are you doing up there?"

"He's got the cat and the kittens in that basket. Did you ever?" exclaimed Aunt Sarah.

"You naughty boy!" commanded Mrs. MacCall, "you pull that thing right back here and let poor Sandyface out."

"I can't, Mrs. MacCall," woefully declared the boy who wanted to be a pirate.

"Then pull it over to your house," said the housekeeper.

"I—I can't do that either," confessed Sammy.

"Why not, I should admire to know?" demanded Aunt Sarah.

"'Cause it's stuck," gloomily explained Sammy. "I can't pull it one way, nor yet the other. Oh, dear! I wish that cat would stop yowling!"

What he feared happened at that moment. His mother, hearing the commotion in the street and seeing a crowd beginning to gather, ran out of the house. She was always expecting something to happen to Sammy; and if a crowd gathered anywhere near the house she surmised the most dreadful peril for her son.

"Sammy! Sammy!" she shrieked. "What has become of Sammy?"

"Here I am, Ma," replied Sammy, with disgust.

"What's the matter with you? Come home this minute!" commanded Mrs. Pinkney, who was a rather near-sighted woman, and having run out without her glasses she did not spy her son in the window of the Corner House.

"I—I can't," confessed the boy, rather shaken.

At that moment Mrs. Pinkney saw the neighbors pointing upward, and hearing them say: "See up there? In the basket! The poor thing!" she naturally thought they referred to the peril of her young son.

"Oh, Sammy Pinkney! But you just wait till your father gets home to-night!" she cried, try-

ing to peer up at the wire. "I knew you'd get into mischief with that thing Neale O'Neil strung up there. Whatever has the boy tried to do? Walk tight-rope?"

"It's in the basket," somebody tried to explain to her.

That was too much for the excitable Mrs. Pinkney.

"He'll fall out of it! Of course he will. And break his precious neck! Oh, get a blanket! Some of you run for the fire ladders! How will we get him down?"

She sat down on the grass, threw her apron over her head, and refused to look upward at the wire carrier in which Sandyface and her kittens were suspended, and out of which she expected her reckless son to fall at any moment.

It was at this exciting moment, and into the hubbub made by the neighbors and Sandyface, that the automobile party whizzed around the corner. Neale brought the car to a sudden stop and everybody screamed.

"That Sammy Pinkney!" gasped Tess, in despair. "I just *knew* he'd get into something!"

"Neale reached up with a rake and unhooked the hanging basket"

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CHAPTER VIII

NEIGHBOR

What with Mrs. Pinkney almost in hysterics, Tom Jonah barking, the goat blatting, Aunt Sarah scolding, and the neighbors in a general uproar, it was scarcely possible for anybody to make himself heard.

Therefore Neale said nothing. He hopped out from behind the steering wheel of the touring car and ran into the back premises, from which he dragged the tall fruit-picking ladder that Uncle Rufus had stowed away.

Fortunately before any excited person turned in a fire alarm, Neale, with the help of Luke Shepard and Uncle Rufus, set up the step-ladder directly under the squalling cat and her kittens. From the top step, on which he perched precariously with Luke and the old negro steadying the ladder, Neale reached up with a rake and unhooked the hanging basket from the tramway.

It was rather a delicate piece of work, and the children were scarcely assured of Sandyface's safety—nor was the old cat sure of it herself—until Neale, hanging the basket on the reversed garden rake, lowered the entire family to the ground.

"'Sartain suah am glad to see dat ol' coat ob'

mine again," mumbled Uncle Rufus, as everybody else was congratulating one another upon the safety of the cats. "I had a paper dollar tucked away ag'in some time w'en I'd need it, in de inside pocket of dat ol' coat. It moughty near got clean 'way f'om me, 'cause of dat boy's foolishness. Sartain suah am de baddes' boy I ever seen."

The consensus of opinion seemed to follow the bent of Uncle Rufus' mind. Sammy was in evil repute in the neighborhood in any case; this was considered the capsheaf.

Had it not been that the aerial tramway was so securely affixed to the two houses, and to take it down would be to deprive Tess, who was innocent, of some amusement, Mrs. Pinkney would have ordered the connections between the two houses severed at once.

As it was, she drove the shamefaced Sammy into the house ahead of her, and some of his boy acquaintances, lingering with ghoulish curiosity outside, heard unmistakable sounds of punishment being inflicted upon the culprit.

He was then sent up to his room to meditate. And just outside his screened window was the tantalizing tramway which Neale had repaired and which was again in good working order.

Sammy had been forbidden to use the new plaything; but the little Corner House girls soon began to feel sorry for him. Even Tess thought that his punishment was too hard.

"For he didn't really hurt Sandyface and the kittens. Only scared 'em," she said.

"But s'pose they'd 've got dizzy and fell out—like I did out of the swing?" Dot observed, inclined to make the matter more serious even than her sister. "*Then* what would have happened?"

Tess nevertheless felt sorry for the culprit, and seeing his woe begone and tear-stained face pressed close to his chamber window, she wrote the following on a piece of pasteboard, stood it upright in the basket and drew it across so that Sammy might read it:

DOnT MINE SAmmY WE Ar SORRY
THe CaTS AR Al RITE
DOT & TESS

The "*cat*astrophy" as Neale insisted upon calling the accident, threw some gloom into an otherwise pleasant day—for the little girls at least. And that evening something else was discovered that sent Dot to bed in almost as low a state of mind as that with which Sammy Pinkney retired.

This second unfortunate incident happened after supper, when they were all gathered in the sitting room, Neale, too, being present. Luke asked Dot if she had decided upon a name for the new baby.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Luke," the smallest Corner House girl replied. "The sailor-baby was christened to-day. Didn't you know?"

"I hadn't heard about it," he confessed. "What is he called?"

Dot told him proudly. And Tess said:

"Don't you think it is a pretty name? Dot found it all her own self. It was painted on a barn."

"What's that?" asked Neale suddenly. "What was painted on a barn?"

"The sailor-baby's name," Dot said proudly. "'Nosmo King Kenway.'"

"On a barn?" repeated the puzzled Neale. "Whose barn?"

When he learned that it was Mr. Stout's tobacco barn he looked rather funny and asked several other questions of the little girls.

Then he drew a sheet of paper toward him and with a pencil printed something upon it, which he passed to Agnes. She burst into laughter at once, and passed the paper on.

"What is it?" Dot asked curiously. "Is it a funny picture he's drawed?"

"It's funnier than a picture," laughed Luke, who had taken a squint at the paper. "I declare, isn't that a good one!"

"I don't think you folks are very polite," Tess said, rather haughtily, for the others were not going to show the paper to the little girls. On the sheet Neale had arranged the letters of the new baby's name as they were meant to be read—for he knew what was painted upon the inside of the doors of Mr. Stout's barn:

NO SMOKING

Ruth, however, would not let the joke go on. She took Dot up on her lap and explained kindly how the mistake had been make. For Nosmo *was* a pretty name; nobody could deny it. And, of course, King sounded particularly aristocratic.

Nevertheless, Dot there and then dropped the sailor-baby's fancy name, and he became Jack, to be known by that name forever more.

After the smaller girls had disappeared stairward, Neale and Luke unfolded one of the card-tables and began a game of chess which shut them entirely out of the general conversation for the remainder of the evening.

The girls and Mrs. MacCall chatted companionably. They had much to tell each other, for, after all, the Corner House girls and Cecile Shepard had spent but one adventurous night together and they needed to learn the particulars of each other's lives before they really could feel "at home with one another," as Agnes expressed it.

Cecile and her brother could scarcely remember their parents; and the maiden aunt they lived with—a half sister of their father's—was the only relative they knew anything about.

"Oh, no," Cecile said, "we can expect no step-up in this world by the aid of any interested relative. There is no wealthy and influential uncle or aunt to give us a helping hand. We're lucky to get an education. Aunt Lorena makes that pos-

sible with her aid. And she does what she can, I know full well, only by much self-sacrifice."

Then the cheerful girl began to laugh reminiscently. "That is," she pursued, "*I* can look forward to the help of no fairy godmother or godfather. But Luke is in better odor with Neighbor than I am."

"'Neighbor'?" repeated Ruth. "Who is he? Or is it a what?"

"Or a game?" laughed Agnes. "'Neighbor'!"

"He is really great fun," said Cecile, still laughing. "So I suppose he might be called a game. He really is a 'neighbor,' however. He is a man named Henry Harrison Northrup, who lives right beside Aunt Lorena's little cottage in Grantham.

"You see, Luke and I used always to work around Aunt Lorena's yard, and have a garden, and chickens, and what-not when we were younger. Everybody has big yards in that part of Grantham. And Mr. Northrup, on one side, was always quarreling with auntie. He is a misogynist—"

"A mis-*what*-inest?" gasped Mrs. MacCall, hearing a new word.

"Oh, I know!" cried Agnes, eagerly. "A woman-hater. A man who hates women."

"Humph!" scoffed Mrs. MacCall, "is there such indeed? And what do they call a man-hater?"

"That, Mrs. MacCall, I cannot tell you," laughed Cecile. "I fear there are no women man-haters—not *really*. At least there is no distinctive title for them in the dictionary."

"So much the worse for the dictionary, then," said the Scotch woman. "And, of course, *that's* man-made!"

"It was only the Greeks who were without 'em," put in Ruth, smiling. "The perfectly good, expressive English word 'man-hater' is in the dictionary without a doubt."

"But do go on about Neighbor," Agnes urged. "Does he quarrel with you people all the time?"

"Not with Luke," Cecile explained. "He likes Luke. He is really very fond of him, although it seems positively to hurt him to show love for anybody.

"But a long time ago Mr. Northrup began to show an interest in Luke. He would come to the fence between his and Aunt Lorena's places, and talk with Luke by the hour. But if either I or aunty came near he'd turn right around and walk away.

"He never allows a woman inside his door and hasn't, they say, for twenty years. He has a Japanese servant—the only one that was ever seen in Grantham; and they get along without a woman."

"I'd like tae see intae that hoos," snapped Mrs. MacCall, shaking her head and dropping

into her broad Scotch, as she often did when excited. "What could twa' buddies of men do alone at housekeeping!"

"Oh, the Jap is trained to it," Cecile said. "Luke says everything is spick and span there. And Mr. Northrup himself, although he dresses queerly in old-fashioned clothes, has always clean linen and is well brushed.

"But he does not often appear outside of his own yard. He really hates to meet women. His front gate is locked. Luke climbs the fence when he goes to see Neighbor; but people with skirts aren't supposed to be able to climb fences; so Mr. Northrup is pretty safe. Even the minister's wife doesn't get in."

"But why do you call him Neighbor?" asked Ruth again.

"That's what he told Luke to call him in the first place. We were not very old when Luke's strange friendship with Mr. Northrup began. After they had become quite chummy Luke, who was a little fellow, asked the old gentleman if he couldn't call him Uncle Henry. You see, Luke liked him so much that he wanted to say something warmer than Mister.

"But that would never do. Mr. Northrup seemed to think that might connect him in people's minds with Aunt Lorena. So he told Luke finally to call him Neighbor.

"Of course, the old gentleman is really a *dear* —only he doesn't know it," continued Cecile.

"He thinks he hates women, and the idea of marriage is as distasteful to him as a red rag is to a bull.

"He is going to leave Luke all his money he says. At any rate, he has promised to do something for him when he gets out of college if he manages to graduate in good odor with the faculty," and Cecile laughed.

"But if Luke should suggest such a thing as marrying—even if the girl were the nicest girl in the world—Neighbor would not listen to it. He would cut their friendship in a moment, I know," added the girl seriously. "And his help may be of great value to Luke later on."

If Cecile had some reason for telling the older Corner House girls and Mrs. MacCall this story she did not point the moral of it by as much as a word or a look. They were quickly upon another topic of conversation. But perhaps what she had said had taken deep root in the heart of one, at least, of her audience.

CHAPTER IX

EVERYTHING AT SIXES AND SEVENS

Things sometimes begin to go wrong the very moment one wakes up in the morning.

Then there is the coming down to breakfast with a teeny, weeny twist in one's temper that makes some unfeeling person say:

"I guess you got out of the wrong side of the bed this morning."

Now, of course, that is silly. There can be no wrong side to a bed—that is, to get out of. Getting up has nothing to do with it. Things are just wrong and that is all there is to it.

Fortunately this state of mind seldom lasted all day with any of the four Corner House girls; nor did they often begin the day in such a humor.

But there are exceptions to every rule, they say. And this Wednesday most certainly was the day when matters were "at sixes and sevens" for Dorothy Kenway.

It would not be at all surprising if the trouble started the evening before when she learned that she had inadvertently named her new baby No Smoking. That certainly was cause for despair as well as making one feel horribly ridiculous.

Of course, Ruth in her kind way, had tried to

make the smallest Corner House girl forget it; but Dot remembered it very clearly when morning came and she got up.

Then, she could not find the slippers she had worn the day before; and if Mrs. MacCall saw her with her best ones on, there would be something said about it—Dot knew that.

Then, Tess seemed suddenly very distant to her. She had something on her mind and carried herself with her very "grown-upest" air with Dot. The latter, on this morning particularly, hated to admit that Tess was more than a very few days older than herself.

Tess went off on this business that made her so haughty, all by herself, right after breakfast. When Dot called after her:

"Where are you going, Tess?" the latter had said very frankly, "Where *you* can't go," and then went right on without stopping for a moment to argue the point.

"I do think that is too mean for anything!" declared Dot to herself, quite too angry to cry. She sat sullenly on the porch steps, and although she heard Sandyface purring very loudly and suggestively, just inside the woodshed door, she would not get up to go to see the old cat's babies —of which Sandyface was inordinately proud.

"Wait," ruminated Dot, shaking her head. "Wait till Tess Kenway wants me to go somewhere with her. *I won't go!* There, now!"

So she sat, feeling very lonesome and miser-

able, and "enjoying" it immensely. She need not have been lonely. She could hear the older girls and Luke laughing in the front of the house, and she would have been welcomed had she gone there. Ruth was always a comforter, and even Agnes seldom said the smallest girl nay.

But Dot had managed to raise a laugh a little while before—she being the person laughed at. She chanced to hear Luke, who was running lightly over the old and yellowed keys of the piano, say:

"No wonder these instruments cost so much. You know it takes several elephants alone to make these," and he struck another chord.

Dot had heard about the intelligence of elephants and like most other little people believed that the great pachyderms could do almost anything. But this was too much for even Dot Kenway's belief.

"Oh, Ruth! elephants can't work at that trade, can they?" she demanded.

"What trade, honey?" asked the surprised older sister.

"Piano making. I should think that carpenters built pianos—not elephants."

Of course, the older ones had laughed, and Dot's spirits had fallen another degree, although Ruth was careful to explain to the little girl that Luke had meant it took the tusks of several elephants to fashion the ivory keys for one piano.

However, Dot was in no mood for "tagging"

after the older ones. She just wanted to sit still and suffer! She heard Mabel Creamer "hoo-hooing" for her from beyond the yard fence, but she would not answer. Had it not been for the Alice-doll (which of course she hugged tight to her troubled little breast) life would have scarcely seemed worth living to the smallest Corner House girl.

And just then she looked up and saw a picture across the street even more woebegone than the one she herself made. It was Sammy Pinkney, gloom corrugating his brow, an angry flush in his cheeks, and sullenly kicking the toe first of one shoe and then the other against the pickets of the fence where he stood.

It was evident that Sammy had been forbidden freedom other than that of his own premises. He stared across at the smallest Corner House girl; but he was too miserable even to hail Dot.

After all, it seemed to the latter, that Sammy was being inordinately punished for having given Sandyface and her family an aerial ride. Besides, misery loves company. Dot was in no mood to mingle with the joyous and free. But Sammy's state appealed to her deeply.

She finally got up off the step and strolled out of the yard and across the street.

"'Lo, Sammy," she said, as the boy continued to stare in another direction though knowing very well that she was present before him.

"'Lo, Dot," he grumbled.

"What's the matter, Sammy?" she asked.

"Ain't nothin' the matter," he denied, kicking on the pickets again.

"Dear me," sighed Dot, "*I* just think *every*thing's too mean for *any*thing!"

"Huh!"

"And everybody at my house is mean to me, too," added the little girl, stirring up her own bile by the audible reiteration of her thoughts. "Yes, they are!"

"Huh!" repeated the scornful Sammy. "They ain't nowhere near as mean to you as my folks are to me."

"You don't know—"

"Did they lick you?" demanded the boy fiercely.

"No-o."

"And then make you stay in your room and have your supper there?"

"No-o."

"Ma brought it up on a tray," the boy said fiercely, "so I couldn't get no second helping of apple dumpling."

"Oh, Sammy!" Somehow, after all, his misery seemed greater than her own. Yet there was a sore spot in the little girl's heart. "I—I wish I could run away," she blurted out, never having thought of such a thing until that very moment. "*Then* they'd see."

"Hist!" breathed Sammy, coming closer and putting his lips as close to the little girl's ear as

the pickets would allow. "Hist! *I am going to run away!*"

Dot took this statement much more calmly than he expected.

"Oh, yes," she said. "When you go to be a pirate. You've told me that before, Sammy Pinkney." In fact, she had been hearing this threat ever since she had come to the old Corner House and become acquainted with this youngster.

"And I *am* going to be a pirate," growled Sammy, with just as deep a voice as he could muster.

"Oh! not *now?*" gasped Dot, suddenly realizing that this occasion was fraught with more seriousness than any previous one of like character. "You aren't going right off now to be a pirate, Sammy Pinkney?"

"Yes, I am," declared the boy.

"Not *now?* Not this morning? Not before your mother comes back from marketing?" for she had seen Mrs. Pinkney's departure a few minutes before.

"Yes, I am," and Sammy clinched it with a vigorous nod, although he had not meant to run away until nightfall. People usually waited for night to run away so it seemed to Sammy, but he was not going to have his intention doubted.

"Oh, Sammy!" gasped Dot, clasping her hands across the Alice-doll's stomach, "are—are there *girl* pirates?"

"Are there what?" questioned Sammy in doubt.

"Can girls run away and be pirates, too?"

"Why—er—they wouldn't dars't."

"Yes, I would."

"You! Dot Kenway?"

"Yes I would," repeated Dot stubbornly.

"You want to be a pirate?" repeated Sammy. Of course he would rather have a boy to run away with. But then—

"Why can't girls be pirates?" demanded the logical Dot. "Don't pirates have to have somebody to cook and wash and keep house for them?"

"I—I don't know," admitted Sammy honestly. "I never read about any girl pirates. But," as he saw Dot's pretty face beginning to cloud over, "I don't know why there shouldn't be, if they wasn't too 'fraid."

"I won't be afraid," Dot declared, steeling herself as she had once done when she was forced to go to the dentist's office.

"We-ell," began Sammy still doubtfully. But Dot was nothing if not determined when once she made up her mind.

"Now, you come right along, Sammy Pinkney, if we're going to run away and be pirates. You know your mother won't let you if she comes home and catches you here."

"But—but we ought to take something to eat

—and some clothes—and—and a pistol and a knife—''

''Oo-ee!'' squealed the little girl. ''You won't take any horrid pistol and knife if you're going to run off to be pirates with *me*, Sammy Pinkney. Why, I'd be afraid to go with you.''

''Huh!'' grumbled Sammy, ''you don't haf to go.''

''But you said I could,'' Dot declared, sure of her position. ''And now you can't back out—you know you can't, Sammy. That wouldn't be fair.''

''Aw, well. We gotter have money,'' he objected faintly.

''I'll run and get my purse,'' the little girl said cheerfully. ''I've got more than fifty cents in it.''

But now unwonted chivalry began to stir faintly in Sammy's breast. If they were going away together, it should be his ''treat.'' He marched into the house, smashed his bank with the kitchen poker, and came out with a pocket full of silver and nickels that looked as if they amounted to much more than they really did.

However, the sinews of war in his pocket was not without a certain inspiration and comfort. Money would go a long way toward getting them to a place where their respective families could neither nag nor punish them.

As runaways they may have been different

from most. But, then, Sammy and Dot were very modern runaways indeed. People who saw them merely observed two very well dressed children, walking hand in hand toward the suburbs of Milton; the little girl hugging a doll to her breast and the boy with a tight fist in one pocket holding down a couple of dollars worth of change.

Who would have dreamed that they were enamored of being pirates and expected to follow a career of rapine and bloodthirsty adventure on the Spanish Main?

CHAPTER X

ABOARD THE NANCY HANKS

It must be confessed—and not to the belittlement of Sammy Pinkney—that he never would have run away to be a pirate on this occasion had it not been for Dot Kenway. When this little miss had once set her mind to a thing it took a good deal to turn her from her purpose.

It had been Sammy's dire threat for a long time that he would seek the adventurous life of a buccaneer on the rolling main. But he had never set a definite date for his departure upon this venture. To-day was the day. Fate willed it thus. And it looked as though fate was disguised in the character of a strong-minded little girl with two cherry-red hair-ribbons and a doll hugged tightly in her arms.

Sammy, however, having once embarked on the venture considered that he must take a certain lead in affairs. Dot certainly had urged him away from home and mother; but now she gave up the guidance of affairs entirely into her companion's hands.

She had no more idea of what "being pirates" meant than she had of the location where "pirating" as a profession might be safely pursued.

On Sammy's part, he knew that pirates roved the sea. The nearest water to the corner of Willow and Main Streets was the canal. Therefore he led the little girl by the hand toward that rather placid body of water that flowed through one end of Milton and into the river.

The canal connected two tributaries of a large watercourse—the largest in the state, in fact; but it was not a very busy waterway. Now and then a battered old barge was drawn through by a pair of equally battered horses or mules. Milton people held the canal folk in some contempt. But then, they knew very little about the followers of the inland waterways as a class.

Sometimes some of the canal boatmen came over as far as Meadow Street to purchase provisions of Mrs. Kranz, or of Joe Maroni, both of whom occupied stores on property belonging now to the four Corner House girls; and the way the two small runaways took on this day led them directly past this Meadow Street property.

"If we are going to be pirates," said Sammy rather soberly for him, "we must lay in a stock of provisions. We've got to eat, you know."

"Oh! have we?" asked the little girl, to whom the fact of piracy was a sublimated sort of existence in which she had not considered it would be necessary to think of mundane things.

"I've got the money, and we'll lay in a stock," Sammy said, proud of his position now as acknowledged leader of the expedition.

Mrs. Kranz, the German woman who kept the delicatessen store, was not at all surprised to see Dot. The Corner House girls often visited her and the other tenants on the property, and Dot was particularly beloved by the good woman.

"My! my! Undt de baby, too? Coom right in undt haf some nice pop-sarsaparilla. I haf some on de ice yet—you undt your young man."

"Oh, Mrs. Kranz!" cried Dot, eagerly, "we haven't come to visit you. We've come to buy something."

But Sammy nudged her quickly. "Let's have the sarsaparilla," he whispered in Dot's ear, as the generous woman bustled away to the icebox. "That'll go fine."

Maria Maroni, oldest of the fruit dealer's family, who dwelt in the cellar of the building but lived mostly with Mrs. Kranz, waited upon Sammy; so the storekeeper herself had no idea of the queer order Sammy gave.

He bought crackers—mostly of the animal kind; a piece of cheese; fishhooks; a ball of twine; a sack of potatoes (Maria ran and got those from her father); a pencil and a pad of paper; some raisins; a jar of peanut butter; some drop-cakes; and ten cents' worth of a confection just then very popular, called by the children "gumballs."

All these things, save the gumballs, he had put in a flour sack, and told Dot they were ready to depart.

"Undt dat iss a pig pundle of t'ings Mrs. Mac-

Call sent you for,'' said Mrs. Kranz placidly, as the runaways started out of the store.

''Oh, Mrs. MacCall didn't send us,'' Dot explained.

''No? Are dey for de poy's mutter?''

''Oh, no. You see, Mrs. Kranz,'' Dot said gravely, ''we're going to be pirates, and we have to have a stock of things to eat. Don't we, Sammy?''

''Come along,'' growled Sammy, fearful that they would be laughed at.

But Mrs. Kranz was befogged. She had never before heard of pirates, and she did not know whether it was a game, a lodge one belonged to, or a picnic. She guessed it was the last, however, for she bade them a hearty farewell and hoped they would have a pleasant day.

As they came out there was Joe Maroni himself, the neat, smiling, brown little Italian in his corduroy suit and with gold rings in his ears, ready waiting with a basket piled high with fruit.

''For the leetle padrona,'' Joe said, with a smiling bow, sending his usual gift to Ruth, whom he considered a grand signora and, as his ''landlady,'' deserving of such thoughtful attentions.

''Aw, say!'' cried Sammy his eyes growing big; ''that's scrumptious.''

''But they are for Ruthie,'' complained Dot. ''We'll have to lug them all around with us—and

no knowing when we'll get home from being pirates."

"Get *home!*" snorted the boy. "Why, we can't never go home again. If they catch us they'll hang us in chains."

Dot's mouth became suddenly a round "O" and nothing more, while her eyes Neale O'Neil would have said had he seen them, "bulged out." The assurance in Sammy's tone seemed final. She could not go home again! And "hanging in chains" somehow had an awfully creepy sound.

But as the boy himself did not seem to take these terrible possibilities very seriously, Dot took comfort from that fact and went on again cheerfully. Nor did she mind carrying the basket of attractive fruit. One of the peaches on top was a little mellow and she stuck a tentative finger into the most luscious spot she could see upon the cheek of that particular peach.

The juice was just as sweet! She touched it with her finger again and then put the finger to her lips.

By this time they had come out of Meadow Street and were crossing the open common toward the canal. On one hand was a blacksmith shop, and the smith was getting ready to shoe a pair of mules which, with drooping ears and saddened aspect, waited in the shade.

There was no moving boat on the canal and nothing stirring along the towpath. But a bat-

tered looking old barge was moored to the nigh bank, and Sammy's face brightened.

"Come on, Dot," he said, glancing back at the little girl. "There's a ship and I guess there isn't anybody aboard. Anyhow, if there is, we'll fight our way over the bulwarks, kill half the crew, and make the others walk the plank. That is what pirates would do."

"Oo-ee!" squealed Dot—and she dropped the basket of fruit.

"Aw, say!" growled Sammy. "What kind of a pirate will *you* make? Of course we have to do what all pirates do."

But it was not anything to do with the true business of pirating that had brought forth that squeal from Dot Kenway. Just as she had been about to touch that peach again with her pink finger, where the sweet juice was oozing out, a great ugly, yellow wasp came along and lit right on that juicy spot!

"Oo-ee!" squealed Dot again. Sammy valiantly came to the rescue, and beat away the "stinger" with his cap. But he carried the fruit himself, as well as the bag of other provisions, the rest of the way to the canalboat.

"Can't trust you with it, Dot," he declared. "You'd have the things all mush if you dropped them every time you saw a bee."

"I don't like bees," declared his little comrade.

"And you was one yourself, once," grinned Sammy. "In that show, you know."

"Oh, but I didn't sting anybody," the little girl replied. "I wouldn't be so mean!"

"How do you know this fellow was going to sting you?" demanded Sammy.

"Why, Sammy Pinkney! Of course he was!" declared Dot, earnestly. "I—I could see it right in his face! He was *so* ugly."

The canalboat was high out of the water, for its hold was empty; but the runaways climbed aboard easily. Sammy was as brave as a lion. He proposed to take possession of the craft and drive ashore anybody who might already be there. Only, there was nobody aboard.

"The crew maybe saw us coming and deserted her," he said to Dot. "Lots of 'em do. When they see the Black Roger flying at our peak—"

"What's the Black Roger?" demanded Dot, big-eyed again. She was gaining considerable information regarding pirates and "pirating."

"Our flag. And when the crews of the merchant ships see it, they tremble," went on Sammy.

"But we haven't got any flag," said the rather literal Dot. "You know we haven't, Sammy."

"Well," he returned cheerfully, "we'll have to make one. I made one once. I got one of my father's handkerchiefs, and blacked it with ma's liquid shoeblacking, all but white spots in the center for a skull and crossbones. But—but," he admitted, "ma took it away from me."

"Never mind," said Dot, kindly. "I've got a handkerchief," and she pulled forth from her

pocket a diminutive bit of cambric. "You get some shoeblacking and we'll make another."

Sammy was for getting settled at once, and he went to the door of the decked over cabin intending to put their possessions inside. But the door was made fast with a big padlock.

However, a hatch cover was off one of the hatchways, and the sunshine shone down into the hold of the canalboat. It seemed dry and comfortable just under this opening and there was a rough ladder which gave access to the hold. Sammy went down first; then Dot delivered the package of groceries into his arms, then the basket of fruit, and lastly backed over the edge herself in a most gingerly way, and was helped down gallantly by the pirate chief.

"Now what'll we do, Sammy?" asked the little girl eagerly.

"We'll unpack our things first," said Sammy. "Then I'll rig up a fish-line. We'll have to catch fish to help out with the rest of the grub," added the practical youngster.

"But not with worms!" cried Dot, with a shudder. "If you bring any of those horrid, squirmy worms aboard this boat, I—I'll just go right home and not be pirates any more."

"Oh! All right," said the scornful Sammy, who found "female pirates" rather more trying than he had supposed. "I'll fish with grasshoppers."

"We-ell," agreed Dot. "Only don't let 'em

jump on me. For if they do I'll scream—I know I shall, Sammy."

"Pooh! Pirates don't scream," growled the boy.

"Not—not even girl pirates?"

"No," said the boy doggedly. " 'Taint the thing to do. We got to be real savage and—"

"Oh, but, Sammy!" gasped the little girl, "I couldn't be savage to a grasshopper."

However, they unpacked their provisions and arranged them on a board. Dot really could not keep her finger off that mellow peach.

"I don't believe Ruthie would mind," she said at last. "And, anyway, it's getting so juicy that maybe it wouldn't be good by the time we got home—"

"Don't I tell you we ain't going home no more?" demanded Sammy.

"Er—well, then I guess we'd better eat the peach to save it," said the little girl, with some hesitancy. "You cut it in half, Sammy," she added with more decision.

Inroads were made upon most of the other provisions within the first hour. For, indeed, what else is there more interesting in being pirates than using up the food laid in for a voyage? Sammy had spent his two dollars with the cheerfulness and judgment of a sailor ashore with his pay in his pocket. And he did not propose to let any greedy little girl eat her share and his own of their stock.

Several times Sammy ran up the ladder to examine the vicinity of the *Nancy Hanks,* as the battered old canalboat was named—its title being painted in big letters along either side of the decked-over cabin, which was a little higher than the remainder of the deck—but the pirate chief sighted no prey on the canal. The waters of that raging main seemed deserted of all craft whatsoever.

Suddenly, however, he sighted an approaching group. It came from the direction of the blacksmith shop. The mules they had seen waiting to be shod ambled ahead at a pace warranted to bring them to the towpath in time. Behind, at the same gait, came a tall, shambling man, what appeared to be a girl some twelve years of age in tattered calico, and shoeless, and a droop-eared, forlorn, yellow hound.

"Hist!" said Sammy, down the well of the hold.

Dot did not know just what to reply to this thrilling summons, but she ventured to ask:

"Do you want to say something to me, Sammy Pinkney? For if you do, you can."

"Hist! Keep quiet," ordered the pirate chief. "They're—they're in the offing."

"Wha—what's a offling?" she demanded. "We're orphans—Ruthie, and Aggie, and Tess, and me. So's Mr. Luke and Cecile. And so's Neale O'Neil," she added thoughtfully. "Is an offling like an orphan?"

"Keep still!" hissed the boy. "They're nearer."

"Who's nearer?"

"Shall I make 'em heave to when they come near 'nough, or shall we let 'em go on and give chase?"

"Goodness me, Sammy!" cried Dot, greatly puzzled. "You'd better come right down here. If anybody's coming we don't want to get into trouble. You *know* we didn't ask the man if we could come into this boat, and perhaps he don't like pirates."

This idea appealed to Sammy, too, as the mules and the little company with them drew near. He slipped over the edge of the hatchway and came down the ladder.

Overhead a threatening black cloud had obscured the sun. Thunder muttered in the distance. A tempest would probably break soon and neither Sammy nor Dot liked thunder and lightning.

"And we didn't bring any umbrella, Sammy Pinkney!" gasped Dot.

"Aw, we won't need one down here. We'll be dry enough," the boy declared.

Just then a drawling voice said: "Lowise, you better pull over that hatch right smart. It's a-goin' to pour cats and dogs in a minute."

"You get the mewels hitched on, Pap," said a shriller and younger voice. "Where's the key to the house? Give it here. And you, Beauty, come

aboard. Ain't no rabbits fur you to chase so near town as this."

"Oh," whispered the little girl below in the hold, "they have come on to our boat!"

"Hist!" said Sammy, shakingly.

"Do—do people do that to pirates?" demanded Dot, anxiously. "I—I thought we were going to —to get on to other people's boats and make them walk over a board."

"*Walk the plank!*" hissed Sammy.

"And aren't we?"

"Wait!" commanded the pirate chief in a most threatening tone.

They waited. By and by somebody came along and kicked the hatch-cover into place and the light was suddenly shut out of the hold. At the same time big drops of rain began drumming on the deck and the thunder burst forth in a rolling reverberation overhead.

"I guess we *will wait,* Sammy Pinkney!" gasped Dot, nervously. "They've shut us up down here!"

CHAPTER XI

AFLOAT ON THE CANAL

Dot Kenway might have been much more frightened, shut into the canalboat hold in the dark, had it not been for two things. She was more afraid of the thunderstorm raging overhead than she was of the dark. Secondly, she had Sammy Pinkney with her.

That savage pirate might shake with nervousness, but he certainly could not be afraid!

"Don't you mind, Dottie," he said to her. "They don't know we're here yet."

"And if they do find out?" she asked.

"Why, if they *do*— Well, ain't we pirates?" demanded Sammy boldly. "I guess when they find that out they'll sing pretty small. Besides, there's only one man and a dog."

"But isn't there a girl?" asked Dot doubtfully.

"Pooh! what's a girl?" demanded Sammy loftily. "Girls don't count. They can't fight."

"No-o. I s'pose not," admitted the smallest Corner House girl, who knew very well that she could not fight. She was willing to cook, wash and keep house for pirates; but Sammy must do the fighting.

However, Sammy Pinkney was to learn something about the canalboat girl that would open his

eyes. Just at this time something occurred that startled both runaways so greatly that they even forgot the thunder that rolled so threateningly.

The canalboat began to move!

"Oh, dear me! what can have happened?" gasped Dot as the boat rocked and swayed in being poled out from the bank by the boatman, and the mules started along the towpath.

"Je-ru-sa-lem!" murmured Sammy.

"Oh, Sammy!"

"We're going," said the boy, gulping down his first surprise.

"But where are we going, Sammy Pinkney? You know very well Ruthie will be scared to death if I'm not back to supper. And your mother—"

"Huh!" exclaimed Sammy, with returning valor, "didn't I tell you if we ran away to be pirates that we couldn't go home again?"

"Yes! but! you! didn't ever *mean* it!" wailed Dot, with big gulps between her words.

"Of course I meant it. Aw, shucks, Dot! What did I tell you? Girls can't be pirates. They're always blubbering."

"Not blubbering!" snapped Dot, too angry to really cry after all.

"Well, you started in to."

"No, I never! Just the same I don't want to be shut up in this old boat—not after it stops thundering and lightering," declared Dot, who, as Tess was not present, felt free to misuse the English language just as she pleased.

Certainly Sammy Pinkney had something more important to think of than the little girl's language. Here he was, a pirate chief, on a buccaneering expedition, and somebody had come along and coolly stolen his piratical craft, himself, and his crew!

If anything would rouse the spirit of a pirate chief it was such an emergency as this. He looked around for something with which to attack the villains who had boarded the *Nancy Hanks,* but he found not a thing more dangerous than his pocketknife and the fishhooks.

"And that's your fault, Dot Kenway," he declared, stricken by this startling discovery. "How am I going to fight these—these pirates, if I haven't anything to fight 'em with?"

"Oh, Sammy!" cried Dot, in amazement. "Are they pirates, just the same as we are pirates?"

"They must be," frankly admitted Sammy. "Else they wouldn't have come along and stolen this canalboat."

"Oo-ee!" gasped the little girl. "And do pirates *steal?*"

"Huh!" ejaculated the boy in vast disgust. "What did you suppose they was pirates for? Of course they steal! And they murder folks, and loot towns, and then bury their money and kill folks so's their ghosts will hang around the buryin' place and watch the treasure."

Horror stricken at the details of such a wicked

state of things, Dot could not for the moment reply. They heard faintly a shrill voice—evidently of the "Lowise" formerly addressed by the canalboatman.

"Look out, Pap! Low bridge! Goin' to stop at Purdy's to git that mess of 'taters he said he'd have ready for us?"

There was a grumbling reply from the man.

"Dunno. It's rainin' so hard. Might's well keep right on to Durginville, I reckon, Lowise."

"Durginville!" murmured Sammy. "My! that's a long way off, Dot!"

"And are you going to let 'em carry us off this way?" demanded the little girl in growing alarm and disgust. "Why, I thought you were a pirate!"

If pirates were such dreadful people as Sammy had just intimated, she wanted to see him exercise some of that savagery in this important matter. Dot Kenway had not considered being kidnapped and carried away from Milton when she set forth to be a pirate's mate. She expected him to defend her from disaster.

Sammy saw the point. It was "up to him," and he was too much of a man to shirk the issue. After all, he realized that, although actually led away from home by this determined little girl, he was the one who had fully understood the enormity of what they were doing. In his own unuttered but emphatic phrase, "She was only a kid."

"All right, Dot," he declared with an assumption of confidence that he certainly did not feel. "I'll see about our getting out of this right away. Of course we won't want to go to Durginville. And it's stopping raining now, anyway, I guess."

The sound of the thunder was rolling away into the distance. But other sounds, too, seemed to have retreated as Sammy climbed the ladder to reach the hatch-cover. The hatchway was all of six feet square. The heavy plank cover that fitted tightly over it, was a weight far too great for a ten year old boy to lift.

Sammy very soon made this discovery. Dot, scarcely able to see him from below, the hold was so dark, made out that he was balked by something.

"Can't you budge it, Sammy?" she asked anxiously.

"I—I guess it's locked," he puffed.

"Oo-ee!" she gasped. "Holler, Sammy! Holler!"

Sammy "hollered." He was getting worried himself now. It was bad enough to contemplate facing a man who might not be fond of pirates —even small ones. But if they could not get out of the hold of the canalboat, they would not be able to face the man or anybody else.

The thought struck terror to the very soul of Sammy. Had he been alone he certainly would have done a little of that "blubbering" that he had just now accused Dot of doing. But "with a

girl looking on a fellow couldn't really give way to unmanly tears."

He began to pound on the hatch with his fists and yell at the top of his voice:

"Lemme out! Lemme out!"

"Oh, Sammy," came the aggrieved voice of Dot from below. "Ask 'em to let us both out. I don't want to be left here alone."

"Aw, who's leavin' you here alone?" growled the boy.

In fact, there seemed little likelihood of either of them getting out. There was not a sound from outside, save a faint shout now and then of the shrill-voiced girl driving the mules.

The man had gone aft and was smoking his pipe as he sat easily on the broad tiller-arm. Sammy and Dot had descended into the canalboat hold by the forward hatchway and only the hollow echoes of their voices drummed through the hold of the old barge, disturbing the man not at all, while the girl was too far ahead on the towpath, spattering through the mud at the mules' heels, to notice anything so weak as the cries of the youthful stowaways.

Exhausted, and with scratched fists, Sammy tumbled down the ladder again. There was just enough light around the hatch to make the gloom where the boy and girl stood a sort of murky brown instead of the oppressive blackness of the hold all about them.

Dot shuddered as she tried to pierce the surrounding darkness. There might be most anything in that hold—creeping, crawling, biting things! She was beginning to lose her confidence in Sammy's ability, pirate or no pirate, to get them out of this difficult place.

"Oh, Sammy!" she gulped. "I—I guess I don't want to be pirates any longer. I—I want to go home."

"Aw, hush, Dot! Crying won't help," growled the boy.

"But—but we can't stay here all night!" she wailed. "It's lots wusser'n it was when Tess and I was losted and we slept out under a tree till morning, and that old owl hollered 'Who? Who-o? all night—only I went to sleep and didn't hear him. But I couldn't sleep here."

"Aw, there ain't no owl here," said Sammy, with some dim idea of comforting his comrade.

"But mebbe there's—there's rats!" whispered the little girl, voicing the fear that had already clutched at her very soul.

"Wow!" ejaculated Sammy. But his scornful tone failed to ring true. There really might be rats in this old hulk of a barge. Were not rats supposed to infest the holds of all ships? Afloat with a cargo of rats in the hold of a ship on the tossing canal was nothing to laugh at.

"I—I believe there are rats here," sobbed Dot again. "And—and we can't get out. If—if they

come and—and nibble me, Sammy Pinkney, I'll ne-never forgive you for taking me away off to be pirates."

"Oh, goodness, Dot Kenway! Who wanted you to come? I'm sure I didn't. I knew girls couldn't be pirates."

"I'm just as good a one as you are—so now!" she snapped, recovering herself somewhat.

Sammy found something just then in his pocket that he thought might aid matters. It was a bag of "gumballs."

"Oh, say, Dot! have a ball?" he asked thrusting out the bag in the dark.

"Oh, Sammy! Thanks!" She found one of the confections and immediately had such a sticky and difficult mouthful that it was impossible for her either to cry or talk for some time. This certainly was a relief to Sammy!

He could give his mind now to thinking. And no small boy ever had a more difficult problem to solve. Two youngsters in the hold of this huge old, empty canalboat, the deck planks of which seemed so thick that nobody outside could hear their cries, and unable to lift the cover. Query: How to obtain their release?

Sammy had read stories of stowaways who had wonderful adventures in the holds of ships. But he did not just fancy climbing around in this black hold, or exploring it in any way far from the hatch-well. There might be rats here, just as Dot suggested.

Of course, they were in no immediate danger of starvation. His two dollars so lavishly spent drove the ghost of hunger far, far away. But, to tell the truth, just at this time Sammy Pinkney did not feel as though he would ever care much about eating.

Even the gumballs did not taste so delicious as he had expected. Anxiety rode him hard—and the harder because he felt, after all, that the responsibility of Dot Kenway's being here rested upon his shoulders. She would never have thought of running away to be pirates all by herself. That was a fact that could not be gainsaid.

Meanwhile the canalboat was being drawn farther and farther away from Milton. Sammy did not wish to go with it, any more than Dot did. The situation was "up to him" indeed—the boy felt it keenly; but he had no idea as to what he should do to escape from this unfortunate imprisonment.

CHAPTER XII

MISSING

Agnes and Cecile had gone down town on a brief shopping trip, and Ruth, with Luke Shepard, was on the wide veranda of the old Corner House.

The great front yard that had been weed grown and neglected when the Kenway sisters and Aunt Sarah had come here to live, was now a well kept lawn, the grass and paths the joint care of Uncle Rufus and Neale O'Neil. For nowadays Neale had time to do little other work than that of running the Kenways' car and working about the old Corner House when he was not at school.

Ruth was busy, of course, with some sewing, for she, like Aunt Sarah, did not believe in being entirely idle while one gossiped. Whenever Ruth looked up from her work there was somebody passing along Main Street or Willow Street whom she knew, and who bowed or spoke to the Corner House girl.

"You have such hosts of friends, Miss Ruth," Luke Shepard said. "I believe you Corner House girls must be of that strange breed of folk who are 'universally popular.' I have rather doubted their existence until now."

"You are a flatterer," Ruth accused him, smil-

ing. "I am sure you and Cecile make friends quite as easily as we do."

"But Grantham is not Milton. There are only a handful of people there."

Ruth bit off a thread thoughtfully.

"Cecile was telling us about 'Neighbor' last evening," she said.

Luke flushed quickly and he looked away from the girl for a moment.

"Oh!" he said. "The poor old gentleman is a character."

"But a very good friend of yours?"

"I am not so sure about that," and Luke tried to laugh naturally. "To tell the truth I'm afraid he's a bit cracked, don't you know."

"Oh, you do not mean that he is really—er—crazy?"

"No. Though they say—somebody has—that we are most of us a little crazy. Neighbor Northrup is more than a little peculiar. Cecile told you he is a woman-hater?"

"Yes. And that he carries his hatred to extremes."

"I should say he does!" exclaimed Luke with vast disgust. "He wants me to promise never to marry."

"Well?"

"My goodness, Miss Ruth! You say that calmly enough. How would you like to be nagged in such a way continually? It's no fun I can assure you."

Ruth laughed one of her hearty, delightful laughs that made even the vexed Luke join in.

"It's like Aunt Sarah," confessed Ruth. "She thinks very poorly of men, and is always advising Agnes and me to 'escape the wrath to come' by joining the spinster sisterhood."

"But you haven't—you *won't?*" gasped Luke in horror.

At that the oldest Corner House girl laughed again, and Luke found himself flushing and feeling rather shamefaced.

"Oh, well," he said, "you know what I mean. You girls wouldn't really be influenced by such foolishness?"

"Doesn't Neighbor influence you?" Ruth asked him quickly.

"No, indeed. Not even when he tries to bribe me. He can keep his old money."

"But he has been your good friend," the girl said slowly and thoughtfully. "And Cecile says he has promised to do much for you."

"And if he got tiffed he would refuse to do a thing. Oh, I know Neighbor!" growled Luke. "Yet you must not think, Miss Ruth," he added after a moment, "that I do not appreciate what he has already done for me. He is the kindest old fellow alive, get him off the subject of women. But he must have been hurt very much by a woman when he was young—he never speaks about it, but so I surmise—and he cannot forget his hatred of the sex.

"'I shall begin to believe you are a man-hater,' laughed Luke"
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"Why," continued the young man, "if it would do him a bit of good—my promising never to marry—any good in the world, there'd be some sense in thinking of it. But it's downright foolishness—and I'll never agree," and the young fellow shook his head angrily.

"If it would cure him of any disease, or the like, I might be coaxed to wear blinders so as not to see the pretty girls at all," and Luke tried to laugh it off again. "But he's wrong—utterly wrong. And old folks should not be encouraged in wrong doing."

"You feel yourself susceptible to the charms of pretty girls, then," suggested Ruth, smiling down at her sewing.

He tried to see her full expression, but could see only the smile wreathing her lips.

"Well, now, Miss Ruth," he said, in defense, "who isn't made happier by seeing a pretty and cheerful face?"

"Some of them say they are made miserable for life by such a sight," Ruth declared demurely. "Or, is it only a manner of speaking?"

"I shall begin to believe you are a man-hater, just as Neighbor is a woman-hater," laughed Luke.

"I have my doubts," confessed Ruth. "But you, Luke, have your own way to win in life, and if this man can and will help you, shouldn't you be willing to give up a little thing like that for policy's sake?"

"A little thing like *what?*" exclaimed Luke Shepard, rather warmly.

"Why—er—getting married," and Ruth Kenway's eyes danced as she looked at him again for an instant.

"The greatest thing in the world!" he almost shouted.

"You mean love is the greatest thing in the world," said Ruth still demurely smiling. "They say marriage hasn't much to do with that—sometimes."

"I believe you are pessimistic regarding the marriage state."

"I don't know anything about it. Never thought of it, really."

Tess just then came singing through the house, having been to see Miss Ann Titus, the dressmaker, regarding certain dresses that were to be got ready for the little girls to wear to school. She had refused to tell Dot where she was going because one of the dresses was to be a surprise to the smallest Corner House girl.

It needed no seer to discover that Tess had been to see the seamstress. She was a polite little girl and she did not like to break in upon other people's conversation; but she was so chock full of news that some of it had to spill over.

"D'juno, Ruthie, that Mr. Sauer, the milkman got 'rested because he didn't have enough milk in his wagon to serve his customers? The inspector said he didn't have a license to peddle

water, and he took him down to the City Hall."

"I had not heard of it, Tess, no," replied her older sister.

"You know that awfully big man, Mr. Atkins—the awfully fat man, you know, who is a lawyer, or something, and always walks down town for exercise, and I s'pose he needs it? He stepped on a banana peel on Purchase Street the other day and almost fell. And if he had fallen on that hard walk I 'most guess he'd 've exploded."

"Oh, Tessie!" exclaimed Ruth, while Luke laughed openly.

"And d'juno, Ruthie, that they are going to stop people from keeping pigs inside the city limits? Mr. Con Murphy can't have his any more, either. For the other day a pig that belonged to Hemstret, the butcher, got away and scared folks awful on Deering Street, 'cause he looked as though he had the yaller janders—"

"The *what?*" gasped her sister, while Luke actually roared.

"The yaller janders," repeated Tessie.

"Do you mean the yellow jaundice? Though how a pig could get such a disease—"

"Maybe. Anyway he was all yellow," Tess went on excitedly. " 'Cause some boys took some ock-er-ra paint out of Mr. Timmins' shop—Timmins, the lame man, you know—and painted him and then let him out."

"Painted Mr. Timmins—the lame man?" gasped Luke, in the midst of his laughter.

"No. The pig that I was telling you about," said the small girl. "And Mrs. Bogert says that the next time Bogert goes to the lodge and stays till two o'clock in the morning, she's going home to her mother and take the children with her," and Tess ended this budget of news almost breathless.

Ruth had to laugh, too, although she did not approve of the children carrying such gossip. "I should know you had called upon Miss Ann Titus," she observed. "I hope you didn't hear anything worse than this."

"I heard her canary sing," confessed Tess; "and her little dog, Wopsy, was snoring dreadfully on the sofa. But I guess I didn't hear anything else. Where's Dot?"

"I'm sure I do not know," Ruth said placidly, while Luke wiped his eyes, still chuckling in a subdued way. He saw that he was beginning to hurt Tess' feelings and he was too kind-hearted to wish to do that. "Dot must be somewhere about the house."

Tess went to look for her. Her tender conscience punished her for having spoken to her little sister so shortly when she was starting on her errand to Miss Ann Titus. But how else could she have gotten rid of the "tagging" Dorothy?

Just now, however, Dot seemed to have mysteriously disappeared. Nobody had seen her for more than an hour. Tess went to the fence between their own and the Creamers' yard and "hoo-hooed" until Mabel appeared.

"Ain't seen her," declared that young person, shaking her head. "I tried to get you and her over here a long time ago. My mother let me make some 'lasses taffy, and I wanted you and Dot to come and help. But I had to do it all alone."

"Was it good?" asked Tess, longingly.

"It *looked* luscious," admitted Mabel scowling. "But that young 'un got at it when it was cooling on the porch and filled it full of gravel. I broke a tooth trying to eat a piece. Want some, Tess?"

"No-o," Tess said. "I guess not. I must find Dot."

But she did not find Dot. She wandered back to the front of the Corner House just as Mrs. Pinkney, rather wild-eyed and disheveled, appeared at the side fence on Willow Street and called to Ruth:

"Have you seen Sammy?"

"Have you seen Dot?" repeated Tess, quite as earnestly.

Ruth was finally shaken out of her composure. She rose from her seat, folding the work in her lap, and demanded:

"What do you suppose has become of them? For of course, if neither Sammy nor Dot can be found, they have gone off somewhere together."

CHAPTER XIII

THE HUE AND CRY

Ruth Kenway's suggestion bore the stamp of common sense, and even the excited mother of Sammy Pinkney accepted that as a fact. Sammy had been playing almost exclusively with the little Corner House girls of late (quite to his anxious mother's satisfaction, be it said) and if Dot was absent the boy was in all probability with her.

"Well, he certainly cannot have got into much mischief with little Dorothy along," sighed Mrs. Pinkney, relieved. "But I most certainly shall punish him when he comes back, for I forbade his leaving the yard this morning. And I shall tell his father."

This last promise made Tess look very serious. It was the most threatening speech that the good woman ever addressed to Sammy. Mr. Pinkney seemed a good deal like a bugaboo to the little Corner House girls; he was held over Sammy's head often as a threat of dire punishment. Sammy and his father, however, seemed to understand each other pretty well.

Sammy had once confided to the little Corner House girls that "We men have to hang together"; and although he respected his father, and feared what the latter might do in the way

of punishment, the punishment was usually inflicted by Mrs. Pinkney, after all.

Sometimes when his mother considered that the boy had been extraordinarily naughty and she told the fact to his father, that wise man would take his son by the hand and walk away with him. Sammy always started on one of these walks with a most serious expression of countenance; but whatever was said to him, or done to him, during these absences, Sammy always returned with a cheerful mien and with a pocketful of goodies for himself and something extra nice for his mother.

Neale O'Neil frequently declared that Mr. Pinkney was one of the wisest men of his time and probably "put it all over old Solomon. They say Solomon had a lot of wives," Neale remarked. "But I bet he didn't know half as much about women and how to handle them as Mr. Pinkney does."

However, to get back to the discovery of the absence of Sammy and Dot. After Tess had searched the neighborhood without finding any trace of them, and Agnes had returned from down town, a council was held.

"Why, they did not even take Tom Jonah with them," observed Ruth.

"If they had," said Agnes, almost ready to weep, "we would be sure they were not really lost."

"Can't you find out at the police station?" suggested Cecile.

"Oh, my! Oh my!" cried Tess, in horror. "You don't s'pose our Dot has really been *arrested?*"

"Listen to the child!" exclaimed Mrs. Pinkney, kissing her. "Of course not. The young lady means that the police may help find them. But I do not know what Sam'l Pinkney would say if he thought the officers had to look for his son."

Ruth, in her usual decisive way, brooked no further delay. Surely the missing boy and girl had not gone straight up into the air, nor had they sunk into the ground. They could not have traveled far away from the corner of Willow and Main Streets without somebody seeing them who would remember the fact.

She went to the telephone and began calling up people whom she knew all about town, and after explaining to Central the need for her inquiries, that rather tart young person did all in her power to give Ruth quick connections.

Finally she remembered Mrs. Kranz. Dot and Sammy might have gone to Meadow Street, for many of their schoolmates lived in the tenements along that rather poor thoroughfare.

Maria Maroni answered the telephone and she, of course, had news of the lost children.

"Why, Miss Ruth," asked the little Italian girl into the transmitter, "wasn't you going on the picnic, too?"

"What picnic?" asked the eldest Corner House girl at the other end of the wire.

"Mrs. Kranz says Dottie and that little boy were going on a picnic. Sure they were! I sold them crackers and cheese and a lot of things. And my father sent you a basket of fruit like he always does. We thought you and Miss Agnes would be going, too."

Ruth reported this to the others; but the puzzle of the children's absence seemed not at all explained. Nobody whom Ruth and Agnes asked seemed to know any picnic slated for this day.

"They must have made it up themselves—all their own selves," Agnes declared. "They have gone off alone to picnic."

"Where would they be likely to go?" asked Luke Shepard, wishing to be helpful. "Is there a park over that way—or some regular picnicking grounds?"

"There's the canal bank," Ruth said quickly. "It's open fields along there. Sometimes the children have gone there with us."

"I just *know* Sammy has fallen in and been drowned," declared Mrs. Pinkney, accepting the supposition as a fact on the instant. "What will I ever say to Sam'l to-night when he comes home?"

"Well," said Tess, encouragingly, "I guess he won't spank Sammy for doing that. At least, I shouldn't think he would."

The older folk did not pay much attention to her philosophy. They were all more or less worried, including Mrs. MacCall and Aunt Sarah. The

latter displayed more trouble over Dot's absence than one might have expected, knowing the maiden lady's usual unattached manner of looking at all domestic matters.

Ruth, feeling more responsibility after all than anybody else—and perhaps with more anxious love in her heart for Dot than the others, for had she not had the principal care of Dot since babyhood?—could not be convinced now that all they could do was to wait.

"There must be some way of tracing them," she declared. "If they were over on Meadow Street somebody must have seen them after they left Mrs. Kranz's store."

"That is the place to take up their trail, Ruth," Luke said. "Tell me how to find the store and I'll go down there and make enquiries."

"I will go with you," the eldest Corner House girl said quickly. "I know the people there and you don't."

"I'll go, too!" cried Agnes, wiping her eyes.

"No," said her sister decisively. "No use in more going. You remain at home with Tess and Cecile. I am much obliged to you, Luke. We'll start at once."

"And without your lunch?" cried Mrs. MacCall.

Ruth had no thought for lunch, and Luke denied all desire for the midday meal. "Come on!" he prophesied boldly, "we'll find those kids before we eat."

"Oh!" sighed Agnes, "I wish Neale O'Neil had not gone fishing. Then he could have chased around in the automobile and found those naughty children in a hurry."

"He would not know where to look for them any more than we do," her sister said. "All ready, Luke."

They set off briskly for the other side of town. Luke said:

"Wish I knew how to run an auto myself. That's going to be my very next addition to the sum of my knowledge. I could have taken you out in your car myself."

"Not without a license in this county," said Ruth. "And we'll do very well. I *hope* nothing has happened to these children."

"Of course nothing has," he said comfortingly. "That is, nothing that a little soap and water and a spanking won't cure."

"No. Dot has never been punished in that way."

"But Sammy has—oft and again," chuckled Luke. "And of course he is to blame for this escapade."

"I'm not altogether sure of that," said the just Ruth, who knew Dot's temperament if anybody did. "It doesn't matter which is the most to blame. I want to find them."

But this was a task not easy to perform, as they soon found out after reaching Meadow Street. Certainly Mrs. Kranz remembered all

about the children coming to her store that morning—all but one thing. She stuck to it that Dot had said they were going on a picnic. The word "pirates" was strange to the ear of the German woman, so having misunderstood it the picnic idea was firmly fixed in her mind.

Maria Maroni had been too busy to watch which way Dot and Sammy went; nor did her father remember this important point. After leaving the store the runaways seemed to have utterly disappeared.

Ruth did not admit this woful fact until she had interviewed almost everybody she knew in the neighborhood. Sadie Goronofsky and her brothers and sisters scattered in all directions to find trace of Dot and Sammy. There was a mild panic when one child came shrieking into Mrs. Kranz's store that a little girl with a dog had been seen over by the blacksmith shop, and that she had been carried off on a canalboat.

"Them canalboatmen would steal anything, you bet," said Sadie Goronofsky, with confidence. "They're awful pad men—sure!"

Luke went down to the blacksmith shop and learned that the horseshoer knew exactly who the canalboatman in question was. And he knew about the little girl seen with him as well.

"That's Cap'n Bill Quigg and Louise. She is his twelve year old gal—and as smart as Bill is lazy. The dog belongs to them. Ornery hound. Wasn't anybody with them, and the old *Nancy*

Hanks, their barge, has gone on toward Durginville. Went along about the time it showered."

The thunderstorm that had passed lightly over the edge of Milton had occurred before Ruth and Luke left the Corner House. This news which the young man brought back from the blacksmith shop seemed not to help the matter in the least. He and Ruth went over to the canal and asked people whom they met. Many had seen the canalboat going toward Durginville; but nobody had spied Sammy and Dot.

Where else could they go with any reasonable hope of finding trace of the runaways? Sammy and Dot, going directly across the open fields to the moored canalboat, and getting aboard that craft and into the hold, their small figures had not been spied by those living or working in the neighborhood.

The searchers went home, Ruth almost in tears and Luke vastly perturbed because he could not really aid her. Besides, he was getting very much worried now. It did seem as though something serious must have happened to Sammy Pinkney and Dot Kenway.

CHAPTER XIV

AN UNEXPECTED DELIGHT

Sammy and Dot, held prisoners in the hold of the *Nancy Hanks,* made one painful discovery at least. They learned that without light the time passed with great slowness.

It seemed as though they had been in the dark many hours longer than was actually the case. They sat down side by side and seriously ate all the gumballs. These scarcely satisfied their youthful appetites and, anyway, as Dot said, it *must* be supper time.

So they ate all of the provisions they could possibly swallow. This attack made fearful inroads upon the stock of provisions. There was no cheese left, few of the animal crackers, and half of the peanut butter was literally "licked up," for they had to use their fingers.

"Ho!" said Sammy, "what's the odds? Fingers was made before spoons."

"Not our fingers, Sammy Pinkney," retorted Dot. "But maybe pirates don't mind about table manners."

Just then her boy comrade was not thinking much about the pirate play. If he had ever felt that he was fitted to rove the seas under the Jolly

Roger banner, on a career of loot and bloodshed, he had quite got over the hallucination.

He wanted to go home. He wanted to get Dot home. He had a very decided belief that if his father interviewed him after this escapade something serious would happen to him.

Dot, having recovered from her first fright, and being blessed now with a very full stomach, began to nod. She finally fell fast asleep with her head on Sammy's shoulder. He let her sink down on the boards, putting the sack of potatoes and his jacket under her head for a pillow.

He could not sleep himself. Of course not! He must keep watch all night long. No knowing when the people who had stolen the barge might come and open the hatchway and attack them. Sammy was quite convinced that the man and the girl had illegally taken possession of the canalboat.

He sat beside the softly breathing Dot and listened to certain rustling sounds in the hold, wondering fearfully what they meant. It seemed to him that no rats could make such noises.

"Might be wolves—or snakes," thought the boy, and shivered desperately as he sat in the dark.

The canalboat continued to go its blundering way, and scarcely a sound from out-of-doors reached the little boy's ears. Captain Bill Quigg fell asleep at the rudder arm and only woke up now and then when he came close to losing his pipe from between his teeth. "Lowise" kept

close at the heels of the ancient mules, urging them with voice and goad. The hound, misnamed Beauty, slept the unhappy sleep of the flea-ridden dog.

The thunderstorm had cleared the air. It was a beautiful afternoon. For although the children in the hold thought it long past their usual supper-time, it was nothing of the kind.

The air in the hold began to feel close and it made Sammy very sleepy as well as Dot. But the boy was faithful to his trust. He propped his eyelids open and manfully held his watch.

Frightened? Never more so, was Sammy Pinkney. But there was some pluck in the youngster and he felt he must put on a bold front before Dot.

As for the canalboat captain and his "crew," they apparently went the even tenor of their way. Cap'n Bill Quigg was not a very smart man—either physically or mentally. The blacksmith at Milton had told Luke Shepard the truth. Little Louise was the smartest member of the Quigg family, which consisted only of herself, her father and the hound dog, Beauty.

She practically "ran the business." In some way Quigg had become possessed of the old *Nancy Hanks* and the mules. He plodded back and forth from one end of the canal to the other, taking such freight as he could obtain. If there chanced to be no freight, as on this occasion, he was quite philosophical about it.

Louise worried. She was of a keen, anxious disposition, anyway. She showed it in her face—a hatchet-face at best behind the plentiful sprinkling of freckles that adorned it. But by no means was the face unattractive.

She had had little schooling—only such as she had obtained in winter when the *Nancy Hanks* was frozen up near a schoolhouse. Then she studied with avidity. Had she ever remained long enough for the teachers really to get acquainted with the shy, odd child, she might have made good friends. As it was, she knew few people well and was as ignorant of life as it was lived by comfortably situated people as a civilized human being could be.

She had begun to scheme and plan for daily existence, and to keep the wolf of hunger away from the door of the canalboat cabin, when she was a very little girl—no older than Dot Kenway herself, in fact. Now she seemed quite grown up when one talked with her, despite her crass ignorance upon most subjects.

This afternoon she paddled on in her bare feet through the mire of the towpath, while the thunder storm passed over and the sun came out again. As she urged on the mules she was planning for a delight that had never yet entered into her crippled life.

She had not urged her father to stop for the farmer's potatoes, whereas on any other occasion she would have insisted upon doing so. A dollar

to be earned was an important thing to Louise Quigg.

But she had two half dollars saved and hidden away in the cabin. She had squeezed the sum out of her bits of housekeeping money during the past two months. For all that time the dead walls and hoardings about Durginville had been plastered with announcements of a happening the thought of which thrilled little Louise Quigg to the very tips of her fingers and toes.

When they reached the Bumstead Lock this afternoon there was a chance for the girl to leave the mules grazing beside the towpath while the water rose slowly in the basin, and she could board the boat and talk with Cap'n Bill.

The hound, awakened by her approach, began sniffing around the edge of the forward hatch cover.

"Wonder what Beauty smells there?" Louise said idly. But her mind was on something else. The captain shook his head without much reflection and, now more thoroughly awakened, lit his pipe again.

"I say, Pap!"

"Wal, Lowise?" he drawled.

"We're going to lay up to-night short of the soapworks at Durginville."

"Heh?" he demanded, somewhat surprised, but still drawling. "What for, Lowise?"

"I want to hitch there by the Lawton Pike."

"Lawsy, Lowise! you don't wanter do no sech thing," said Cap'n Bill.

"Yes I do, Pap."

"Too many folks goin' to be there. A slather of folks, Lowise. Why! the circus grounds is right there. This is the day, ain't it?"

"That's it, Pap. I want to see the circus."

"Lawsy, Lowise!" the man stammered. "Circuses ain't for we folks."

"Yes they are, Pap."

"Ain't never been to one in all my life, Lowise," Cap'n Bill said reflectively.

"No more ain't I," agreed the girl. "But I'm goin' to this one."

"You goin'?" he demanded, his amazement growing.

"Yes. And you're goin' too, Pap."

"Git out!" gasped Cap'n Bill, actually forgetting to pull on his pipe.

"Yes, you are," declared Louise Quigg, nodding her head. "I've got the two half dollars. Beauty will stay and mind the boat. I jest got a taste in my mouth for that circus. Seems to me, Pap, I'd jest *die* if I didn't see it."

"Lawsy, Lowise!" murmured Captain Bill Quigg, and was too amazed to say anything more for an hour.

The *Nancy Hanks* got through the lock and the mules picked up the slack of the towrope again at Louise's vigorous suggestion. Inside the hold

Sammy and Dot both wondered about the stopping of the boat. Dot was awakened by this.

"Sammy," she murmured, "is it morning? Have we been here all night?"

"I—I guess not, Dot. It can't be morning. Are you hungry?"

"No-o. I guess not," confessed the little girl.

"Then it can't be morning," Sammy declared, for what better time-keeper can there be than a child's stomach?

"But aren't they going to let us out—not ever, Sammy?" wailed the little girl.

"Pshaw! Of course they will. Some time they'll want to load up this old boat. And then they'll have to open the door up there in the deck. So we'll get out."

"But—but suppose it should be a long, long time?" breathed Dot, thrilled with the awfulness of the thought.

"We got plenty to eat," Sammy said stoutly.

"Not now we haven't, Sammy," Dot reminded him. "We ate a lot."

"But there's all the potatoes—"

"I wouldn't like 'em raw," put in Dot, with decision. "And you can't catch any fish as you were going to with your hook and line, Sammy. I heard that girl that's with the other pirates," she added, "tell their dog that he couldn't even catch rabbits along the canal. And what do you think, Sammy Pinkney!"

"What?" he asked, drearily enough.

"Why, Sadie Goronofsky said last spring that she had an uncle that was a rabbit. What do you think of that? I never heard of such a thing, did you?"

"He was a rabbit, Dot?" gasped Sammy, brought to life by this strange statement.

"That's just what she said. She said he was a rabbit, and he wore a round black cap and had long whiskers—like our goat, I guess. And he prayed—"

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" ejaculated Sammy.

"And the rabbit, Sadie's uncle, prayed," went on Dot, uninfluenced by Sammy's ejaculation. "Now what do you think of that?"

Master Sammy was as ignorant of the Jewish ritual and synagogue officers as was Dot Kenway. He burst out with disgust:

"I think Sadie Goronofsky was telling a fib, that's what *I* think!"

"I'm afraid so," Dot concluded with a sigh. "But I don't like to think so. I meant to ask Ruthie about it," and she shook her head again, still much puzzled over Sadie's uncle who was a rabbi.

The day waned, and still the two little stowaways heard nothing from above—not even the snuffing of the old hound about the hatchcover. They were buried it seemed out of the ken of other human beings. It made them both feel very despondent. Sammy stuck to his guns and would not cry; but after a while Dot sobbed herself to

sleep again—with a great luscious peach from Ruthie's basket of fruit, clutched in her hand and staining the frock of the Alice-doll.

The *Nancy Hanks* was finally brought to a mooring just across the canal from the tented field where the circus was pitched. The dirty brown canvas of the large and small tents showed that the circus had already had a long season. Everything was tarnished and tawdry about the show at this time of year. Even the ornate band wagon was shabby and the vociferous calliope seemed to have the croup whenever it was played.

But people had come from far and near to see the show. Its wonders were as fresh to the children as though the entertainment had just left winter quarters, all spic and span.

From the deck of the *Nancy Hanks* there looked to be hundreds and hundreds of people wandering about the fields where the tents were erected.

"Oh, come on, Pap, le's hurry!" exclaimed Louise Quigg, gaspingly. "Oh, my! Everybody'll see everything all up before we get there!"

The mules were driven aboard over the gangplank and stabled in the forward end of the house. The cabin door was locked and Beauty set on guard. Without the first idea that they were leaving any other human beings upon the barge when they left it, Louise and her father walked toward the drawbridge on the edge of town, over which they had to pass to reach the showgrounds.

Louise had hurriedly cooked supper on the other side of the partition from the coop where the mules were stabled. The fire was not entirely out when she had locked the door. Her desire to reach the showgrounds early made the child careless for once in her cramped life.

The mules, quarreling over their supper, became more than usually active. One mule bit the other, who promptly switched around, striving to land both his heels upon his mate's ribs.

Instead, the kicking mule burst in the partition between the stable and the living room, or cabin, of the *Nancy Hanks.* The flying planks knocked over the stove and the live coals were spread abroad upon the floor.

This began to smoke at once. Little flames soon began to lick along the cracks between the deck planks. The mules brayed and became more uneasy. They did not like the smell of the smoke; much less did they like the vicinity of the flames which grew rapidly longer and hotter.

As for Beauty, the hound, her idea of watching the premises was to curl down on an old coat of Quigg's on deck and sleep as soundly as though no peril at all threatened the old canalboat and anybody who might be aboard of it.

CHAPTER XV

THE PURSUIT

Neale O'Neil did not return to Mr. Con Murphy's with a creel of fish until late afternoon. He was going to clean some of his fish and take them as a present to the Corner House girls; but something the little cobbler told him quite changed his plan.

"Here's a letter that's come to ye, me bye," said Con, looking up from his tap, tap tapping on somebody's shoe, and gazing over the top of his silver-bowed spectacles at Neale.

"Thanks," said Neale, taking the missive from the leather seat beside Mr. Murphy. "Guess it's from Uncle Bill. He said he expected to show in Durginville this week."

"And there's trouble at the Corner House," said the cobbler.

"What sort of trouble?"

"I don't rightly know, me bye; save wan of the little gals seems to be lost."

"Lost!" gasped Neale anxiously. "Which one? Tess? Dot? Not *Agnes?*"

"Shure," said Con Murphy, "is that little beauty likely to be lost, I ax ye? No! 'Tis the very littlest wan of all."

"Dot!"

"'Tis so. The other wan—Theresa—was here asking for her before noon-time," the cobbler added.

Neale waited for nothing further—not even to read his letter, which he slipped into his pocket; but hurried over the back fence into the rear premises of the Corner House.

By this time the entire neighborhood was aroused. Luke had called up the police station and given a description of Sammy and Dot. The telephone had been busy most of the time after he and Ruth had returned from their unsuccessful visit to the canal.

Agnes, red-eyed from weeping, ran at Neale when she saw him coming.

"Oh, Neale O'Neil! Why weren't you here? Get out the auto at once! Let us go and find them. I *know* they have been carried off—"

"Who's carried them, Aggie?" he demanded. "Brace up. Let's hear all the particulars of this kidnapping."

"Oh, you can laugh. Don't you dare laugh!" expostulated Agnes, quite beside herself, and scarcely knowing what she said. "But somebody must certainly have stolen Dot."

"That might be," confessed Neale. "But who in the world would want to steal Sammy? I can't imagine anybody wanting a youngster like him."

"Do be serious if you can, Neale," admonished Ruth, who had likewise been weeping, but was critical of the ex-circus boy as usual.

"I am," declared Neale. "Only, let's get down to facts. Who saw them last and where?"

He listened seriously to the story. His remark at the end might not have been very illuminating, but it was sensible.

"Well, then, if Mrs. Kranz and Joe Maroni saw them last, that's the place to start hunting for the kids."

"Didn't we go there?" demanded Ruth, sharply. "I have just told you—"

"But you didn't find them," Neale said mildly. "Just the same, I see nothing else to do but to make Mrs. Kranz's store the starting point of the search. The whole neighborhood there should be searched. Start running circles around that corner of Meadow Street."

"Didn't Luke and I go as far as the canal?" and Ruth was still rather warm of speech.

"But I guess Neale is right, Ruth," Luke put in. "I don't know the people over there or the neighborhood itself. There may have been lots of hiding places they could have slipped into."

"It's the starting point of the search," Neale declared dogmatically. "I am going right over there."

"Do get out the auto," cried Agnes, who had uncanny faith in the motor car as a means of aid in almost any emergency. "And I'm going!"

"Let's all go," Cecile Shepard suggested. "I think we ought to interview everybody around that shop. Don't you, Luke?"

"Right, Sis," her brother agreed. "Come on, Miss Ruth. Many hands should make light work. It isn't enough to have the constables on the outlook for the children. It will soon be night."

Although Ruth could not see that going to Meadow Street again promised to be of much benefit, save to keep them all occupied, she agreed to Neale's proposal which had been so warmly seconded by Luke.

The boys got out the automobile and the two older Corner House girls, with Cecile, joined them. The car rolled swiftly away from home, leaving Tess in tears, Mrs. MacCall, Aunt Sarah, Uncle Rufus and Linda in a much disturbed state of mind, and poor Mrs. Pinkney in the very lowest depths of despair.

They had all had a late luncheon—all save Neale. He had eaten only what he had put in his pocket when he left for his fishing trip to Pogue Lake that morning. It was approaching dinner time when they reached Meadow Street, but none of the anxious young people thought much about this fact.

The news of the loss of Dot Kenway and Sammy Pinkney had by this time become thoroughly known in the neighborhood of the Stower property on Meadow Street. Not only were the tenants of the Corner House girls, but all their friends and acquaintances, interested in the search.

Groups had gathered about the corner where

Mrs. Kranz's store and Joe Maroni's fruit stand were situated, discussing the mystery. Suggestions of dragging the canal had been made; but these were hushed when the kindly people saw Agnes' tear-streaked face and Ruth Kenway's anxious eyes.

"Oh, my dear!" gasped Mrs. Kranz, her fat face wrinkling with emotion, and dabbing at her eyes while she patted Ruth's shoulder. "If I had only knowed vat dem kinder had in der kopfs yedt, oh, my dear! I vould haf made dem go right avay straight home."

"De leetla padrona allow, I go right away queek and looka for theem—yes? Maria and my Marouche watcha da stan'—sella da fruit. Yes?" cried Joe Maroni to the oldest Corner House girl.

"If we only—any of us—knew where to search!" Ruth cried.

Neale and Luke got out of the automobile, leaving the girls surrounded by the gossipy, though kindly, women of the neighborhood and the curious children. Neither of the young fellows had any well defined idea as to how to proceed; but they were not inclined to waste any more time merely canvassing the misfortune of Dot and Sammy's disappearance.

Neale, being better acquainted with the dwellers in this neighborhood, seized a half-grown youth on the edge of the crowd and put several very pertinent questions to him.

Was there any place right around there that

the children might have fallen into—like a cellar, or an excavation? Any place into which they could have wandered and be unable to get out of, or to make their situation known? Had there been an accident of any kind near this vicinity during the day?

The answers extracted from this street youth, who would, Neale was sure, know of anything odd happening around this section of Milton, were negative.

"Say, it's been deader'n a doornail around here for a week," confessed the Meadow Street youth. "Even Dugan's goat hasn't been on the rampage. No, sir. I ain't seen an automobile goin' faster than a toad funeral all day. Say, the fastest things we got around here is the canal-boats—believe me!"

"Funny how we always come around to that canal—or the barges on it—in this inquiry," murmured Luke to Neale O'Neil.

The two had started down the street, but Neale halted in his walk and stared at the young collegian.

"Funny!" he exclaimed suddenly. "No, there isn't anything funny in it at all. The canal. Canalboats. My goodness, Mr. Shepard, there must be something in it!"

"Water," growled Luke. "And very muddy water at that. I will not believe that the children fell in and were drowned!"

"No!" cried Neale just as vigorously. Then

he grinned. "Sammy Pinkney's best friends say he will never be drowned, although some of them intimate that there is hemp growing for him. No, Sammy and Dot would not fall into the canal. But, crickey, Shepard! they might have fallen into a canalboat."

"What do you mean? Have been carried off in one? Kidnapped—actually kidnapped?"

"Sh! No. Perhaps not. But you never can tell what will happen to kids like them—nor what they will do. Whew! there's an idea. Sammy was always threatening to run away and be a pirate."

"The funny kid!" laughed Luke. "But Dot did not desire such a romantic career, I am sure."

"Did you ever find out yet what was in a girl's head?" asked Neale, with an assumption of worldly wisdom very funny in one of his age and experience. "You don't know what the smallest of them have in their noddles. Maybe if Sammy expressed an intention of being a pirate she wasn't going to be left behind."

He laughed. But he had hit the fact very nearly. And it seemed reasonable to Luke the more he thought of it.

"But on a canalboat?" he said, with lingering doubts.

"Well, it floats on the water, and it's a boat," urged Neale. "Put yourself in the kid's place. If the idea struck you suddenly to be a pirate

where would you look around here for a pirate ship and water to sail it?"

"Great Peter!" murmured Luke. "The boundless canal!"

"Quite so," rejoined Neale O'Neil, his conviction growing. "Now, on that basis, let's ask about the barges that have gone east out from Milton to-day."

"Why not both ways?" queried Luke, quickly.

"Because most of the canalboats coming west go no farther than the Milton docks; and if the kids had got a ride on one into town, they would long since have been home. But it is a long journey to the other end of the canal. Why, it's fifteen or eighteen miles to Durginville."

"How are you going to find out about these boats?"

Neale had a well defined idea by this time. He sent Luke back to the car to pacify the girls as best he could, but without taking time to explain to the collegian his intention in full. Then the boy got to work.

Within half an hour he interviewed the blacksmith and half a dozen other people who lived or worked in sight of the canal. He discovered that, although two barges had gone along to the Milton Lock at the river side since before noon, only the old *Nancy Hanks* had gone in the other direction.

He came back to the car and the waiting party in some eagerness.

"Oh, Neale! have you found them?" cried Agnes.

"Of course he hasn't. Do not be so impatient, Aggie," admonished Ruth.

"I have an idea," proclaimed Neale, as he stepped into the car and turned the starting switch.

"A trace of the children?" Cecile asked.

"It's worth looking into," said Neale with much more confidence than he really felt. "We'll run up to the first lock and see if the lock-keeper noticed anybody save the captain and his little girl on that barge that went through this afternoon. Maybe Dot got friendly with the girl and she and Sammy went along for a ride on the *Nancy Hanks*. They say this Bill Quigg that owns that canalboat isn't any brighter than the law allows, and he might not think of the kids' folks being scared."

"Oh! it doesn't seem reasonable," Ruth said, shaking her head.

But she did not forbid Neale to make the journey to the lock. The road was good all the way to Durginville and it was a highway the Corner House girls had not traveled in their automobile. At another time they would have all enjoyed the trip immensely in the cool of the evening. And Neale drove just as fast as the law allowed—if not a little faster.

Agnes loved to ride fast in the auto; but this was one occasion when she was too worried to

enjoy the motion. As they rushed on over the road, and through the pleasant countryside, they were all rather silent. Every passing minute added to the burden of anxiety upon the minds of the two sisters and Neale; nor were the visitors lacking in sympathy.

After all, little folk like Sammy and Dot are in great danger when out in the world alone, away from the shelter of home. So many, many accidents may happen.

Therefore it was a very serious party indeed that finally stopped at Bumstead Lock to ask if the lock-keeper or his wife, who lived in a tiny cottage and cultivated a small plot of ground near by, had noticed any passengers upon Cap'n Bill Quigg's barge.

"On the *Nancy Hanks?*" repeated the lock-keeper. "I should say 'no'! young lady," shaking his head emphatically at Ruth's question. "Why, who ever would sail as a passenger on that old ramshackle thing? I reckon it'll fall to pieces some day soon and block traffic on the canal."

Ruth, disappointed, would not have persevered. But Luke Shepard asked:

"Is there much traffic on the canal?"

"Well, sometimes there is and sometimes there ain't. But I see all that goes through here, you may believe."

"How many canalboats went toward Durginville to-day?" the collegian inquired.

"Why—lemme see," drawled the lock-keeper

thoughtfully, as though there was so much traffic that it was a trouble to remember all the boats. "Why, I cal'late about *one*. Yes, sir, one. That was the *Nancy Hanks*."

"She ought to be a fast boat at that," muttered Neale O'Neil. "Nancy Hanks was some horse."

"So that was the only one?" Luke persevered. "And you spoke with Cap'n Quigg, did you?"

"With Bill Quigg?" snapped the lock-keeper, with some asperity. "I guess not! I ain't wastin' my time with the likes of him."

"Oh-ho," said Luke, while his friends looked interested. "You don't approve of the owner of the *Nancy Hanks?*"

"I should hope not. I ain't got no use for him."

"Then he is a pretty poor citizen, I take it?"

"I cal'late he's the poorest kind we got. He ain't even wuth sendin' to jail. He'd gone long ago if he was. No. I've no use for Cap'n Bill."

"But you saw there was nobody with him on the boat—no children?"

"Only that gal of his."

"No others?"

"Wal, I dunno. I tell you I didn't stop none to have any doin's with *them*. I done my duty and that's all. I ain't required by law to gas with all the riffraff that sails this here canal."

"I believe you," agreed Luke mildly. He looked at Neale and grinned. "Not very conclusive, is it?" he asked.

"Not to my mind. Bet the kids were on there with this little girl he speaks of," muttered Neale.

"Oh, do you believe it, Neale?" gasped Agnes, leaning over the back of the seat.

"I am sure we are much obliged to you, sir," Ruth said, sweetly, as the engine began to roar again.

"What's up, anyway?" asked the crabbed lock-keeper. "You got something on that Bill Quigg?"

"Can't tell, Mister," Neale said seriously. "You ask him about it when he comes back."

"Now, Neale, you've started something," declared Ruth, as the automobile sped away. "You just see if you haven't."

CHAPTER XVI

THE RINGMASTER

"Just the same, that old fellow didn't even know whether there was somebody aboard the canalboat with Quigg and his daughter or not," Neale O'Neil said, as they turned back into the Durginville road.

"Oh!" cried Cecile. "Are you going on?"

"We are—just," said her brother. "Until we solve the mystery of the *Nancy Hanks.*"

"Do you suppose that canal boatman is bad enough to have shut the children up on his boat and will keep them for ransom?" demanded Agnes, filled with a new fear.

"He's not a brigand I should hope," Cecile Shepard cried.

"Can't tell what he is till we see him," Neale grumbled. "If this old canalboat hasn't been wrecked or sunk, we'll find it and interview Cap'n Quigg before we go back."

"Meanwhile," Ruth said, with more than a little doubt, "the children may be wandering in quite an opposite direction."

"Why, of course, our guess may be wrong, Ruth," Luke said thoughtfully, turning around

the better to speak with the oldest Corner House girl. "However, we are traveling so fast that it will not delay us much."

"Pshaw, no!" exclaimed Neale. "We'll be in Durginville in a few minutes."

But they did not get that far. Crossing the canal by a liftbridge they swept along the other side and suddenly coming out of the woods saw before them a tented city.

"Why!" cried Cecile, "it's a circus!"

"I saw the pictures on the billboards," her brother admitted. "If we only had the children with us, and everything was all right, we might go."

"Sure we would," responded Neale, smiling.

"Oh, Neale!" cried Agnes, "is it Uncle Bill's?"

"Yes. I have a letter in my pocket now from him that I've had no chance to read."

"You don't suppose Mr. Sorber knows anything about the children?" said Ruth, a little weakly for her.

"How could he?" gasped Agnes. "But we ought to stop and ask."

"And see about the calico pony," chuckled Neale. "Tess and Dot have been hounding me to death about that."

"You don't suppose Dot could have started out to hunt for the circus to get that pony, do you?" suggested Ruth, almost at her wits' end to imagine what had happened to her little sister and her friend.

"We'll know about that shortly," Neale declared.

Suddenly Luke Shepard exclaimed:

"Hullo, what's afire, Neale? See yonder?"

"At the canal," cried his sister, seeing the smoke too.

"Is it a house?" asked Agnes.

"A straw stack!" cried Neale. "Must be. Some farmer is losing the winter's bedding for his cattle."

"It is on the canal," Luke put in. "Don't you see? There's one of those old barges there—and the smoke is coming from it."

"There are the flames. The fire's burst out," Agnes cried.

Suddenly Ruth startled them all by demanding:

"How do we know it isn't the *Nancy Hanks?*"

"Crickey! We don't," acknowledged Neale, and immediately touched the accelerator. The car leaped ahead. They went roaring on toward the circus grounds and the canal, and people on the road stepped hastily aside at the "Honk! Honk!" of the automobile horn.

Fortunately there were not many vehicles in the road, for most of the farmers' wagons had already reached the grounds, and their mules and horses were hitched beside the right of way. But there was quite a crowd upon the tented field. This crowd had not, however, as Louise Quigg feared "seen everything all up" before the canal-boat girl and her father reached the tents.

Louise wanted to see everything to be seen outside before paying over their good money to get into the big show. So they wandered among the tents for some time, without a thought of the old canalboat. Indeed, they were out of sight of it when the mule kicked over the stove on the *Nancy Hanks* and that pirate craft (according to the first hopes of Sammy Pinkney) caught fire.

Indeed, nobody on the circus grounds was looking canalward. Torches were beginning to flare up here and there in the darkening field. There were all kinds of sideshows and "penny pops"—lifting machines, hammer-throws, a shooting gallery, a baseball alley with a grinning black man dodging the ball at the end—"certainly should like to try to hit that nigger," Pap declared—taffy booths, popcorn machines, soft drink booths, and a dozen other interesting things.

Of course, Louise and her father could only look. They had no money to spend on side issues —or sideshows. But they looked their fill. For once Cap'n Bill appeared to be awake. He was as interested in what there was to be seen as the child clinging to his hairy hand.

They went back of the big tent and there was one with the canvas raised so that they could see the horses and ponies stabled within. Some of the fattest and sleekest horses were being harnessed and trimmed for the "grand entrance," and such a shaking of heads to hear the tiny bells

ring, and stamping of oiled hoofs as there was—all the airs of a vain girl before her looking-glass!

Louise was stricken dumb before a pony, all patches of brown and cream color, and with pink like a seashell inside its ears and on its muzzle. The pony's mane was all "crinkly" and its bang was parted and braided with blue ribbons.

"Oh, Pap!" gasped the little girl, breathlessly, "isn't he a *dear?* I never did see so harnsome a pony."

A short, stout man, with a very red face and a long-lashed whip in his hand who was standing by, heard the canalboat girl and smiled kindly upon her. He was dressed for the ring—shiny top hat, varnished boots, and all, and Louise thought him a most wonderful looking man indeed. If anybody had told her Mr. Bill Sorber was the president of the United States she would have believed it.

"So you like that pony, do you?" asked the ringmaster. "He's some pony. I reckon the little girls he belongs to will like him, too."

"Oh, isn't he a circus pony?" asked Louise, wide-eyed.

"He was. But I'm just going to send him to Milton to live with some little girls I know, and I bet Scalawag will have a lazy time of it for the rest of his natural life. And he'll like that," chuckled Mr. Sorber, deep in his chest, "for

Scalawag's the laziest pony I ever tried to handle."

"Oh," murmured Louise, "he seems too nice a horse to be called by such a bad name."

"Bless you! he don't mind it at all," declared the ringmaster. "And it fits him right down to the ground! He's as full of tricks as an egg is of meat—yes ma'am! Ain't you, Scalawag?"

He touched the pony lightly with his whip upon his round rump and the pony flung out his pretty heels and whinnied. Then at a touch under his belly Scalawag stood up on his hind legs and pawed the air to keep his balance.

"Oh!" gasped Louise Quigg, with clasped hands.

"Just as graceful as a barrel, Scalawag," chuckled Mr. Sorber. "He's too fat. But I just can't help feedin' critters well. I like to feed well myself. And I know where he's going to live in Milton he'll be well tended. Hullo! what's going on?"

For suddenly a shout was heard beyond the main tent. Somebody cried, "Fire! Fire!" and there was a roaring of an automobile approaching the circus grounds at a rapid rate.

"What's goin' on?" repeated Mr. Sorber, and started upon an elephantine trot for the canal side of the field.

"Come on, Pap! We don't want to miss nothin'," gasped Louise, seizing the gaping

Quigg's hand. She left the calico pony, however, with a backward glance of longing.

The crowd broke for the canal bank. When the captain and his daughter came in sight of the fire the flames were shooting ten feet high out of the cabin roof.

The boat was moored across the canal. Neale, driving down to the bank, saw that the water was between them and the fire, so he halted the car. A heavy man, bearing two empty pails in each hand, and followed closely by another man and a little girl likewise bearing buckets, came gaspingly to the automobile.

"Hi, Mister!" puffed Mr. Bill Sorber, "ast your party to git out and take us over the bridge in that there machine of yours, will you? That canalboat belongs to this here man and his little gal—why, Neale!"

"Hullo, Uncle Bill! Hop in—you and your friends," cried Neale.

"Come in—hurry, Mr. Sorber!" Ruth added her plea. "Oh!" she said to Louise, "is that the *Nancy Hanks?*"

"Sure as ever was," gulped Louise. "Come on, Pap! John and Jerry will be burnt to a cinder, so they will."

"Tell me, child," Luke said, lifting the girl into his lap as he sat in front with Neale, and crowding over to give the lanky Cap'n Quigg room to sit. "Tell me, are there others aboard the boat?"

"John and Jerry," sobbed Louise.

"Well, well!" Luke soothed. "Don't cry. They can open the door of the cabin and walk out, can't they?"

"Nop. They're chained to stanchions."

"*Chained?*" gasped the excitable Agnes from the rear. "How awful! Have you got children—"

"Aw, who said anything about children?" demanded Louise snappily. "Only John and Jerry."

"Well?"

"Them's mules," said the child, as Neale drove the car on at increasing speed.

"Tell us," Ruth begged, quite as anxious now as her sister, "have you seen two children—a boy and a girl—this afternoon?"

"Lots of 'em," replied Louise, succinctly.

Here Cap'n Bill put in a word. "If there's anything to see, children, or what not, Lowise seen 'em. She's got the brightest eyes!"

"We are looking for a little girl with a doll in her arms and a boy about ten years old. They were carrying a big paper bag and a basket of fruit, and maybe were near the canal at Milton—right there at the blacksmith shop where you had your mules shod to-day."

This was Luke's speech, and despite the jarring and bouncing of the car he made his earnest words audible to the captain of the canalboat and to his daughter.

"Did they come aboard your boat? Or did you see them?" he added.

"Ain't been nobody aboard our boat but our ownselfs and Beauty," declared Louise.

"And you did not see two children—"

"Holt on!" cried the girl. "I guess I seen 'em when we was waitin' to get the mules shod. They went by."

"Which way were they going?"

"Toward the canal—they was. And our boat was in sight. But I didn't see 'em after."

"Oh, my dear!" cried Ruth, from the tonneau, "they could not possibly be shut up anywhere on your boat?"

"Why, they wasn't in the cabin, of course—nor the mules' stable," drawled the captain. "Warn't nowhere else."

The automobile roared down toward the burning canalboat. The crowd from the circus field lined up along the other bank; but the towpath was deserted where the *Nancy Hanks* lay. The flames were rapidly destroying the boat amidships.

CHAPTER XVII

SCALAWAG GETS A NEW HOME

A dog barking aroused Sammy. He must, after all, have fallen into a light doze. With Dot sleeping contentedly on the bag of potatoes and his coat, and the only nearby sounds the rustling noise that he had finally become scornful of, the boy could not be greatly blamed for losing himself in sleep.

But he thought the dog barking must be either his Buster or old Tom Jonah, the Corner House girls' dog. Were they coming to search for him and Dot?

"Oh, wake up, Dot! Wake up!" cried Sammy, shaking the little girl. "There's something doing."

"I wish you wouldn't, Tess," complained the smallest Corner House girl. "I don't want to get up so early. I—I've just come asleep," and she would have settled her cheek again into Sammy's jacket had the boy not shaken her.

"Oh, Dot! Wake up!" urged the boy, now desperately frightened. "There's—there's smoke."

"Oe-ee!" gasped Dot, sitting up. "What's happened? Is the chimney leaking?"

"There's something afire. Hear that pounding? And the dog!"

It was the desperate kicking of the mules, John and Jerry, they heard. And the kicking and the barking of Beauty, the hound, continued until the Corner House automobile, with the bucket brigade aboard, roared down to the canalboat and stopped.

The fire was under great headway, and every person in the party helped to quench it. The girls, as well as the men and boys, rushed to the work. To see the old boat burn when it was the whole living of the Quiggs, gained the sympathy of all.

Neale leaped right down into the water and filled buckets and handed them up as fast as possible. Luke and the girls carried the full pails and either threw the contents on the flames or set the pails down for Mr. Sorber to handle.

The ringmaster was in his element, for he loved to direct. His shouted commands would have made an impression upon an organized fire department. And he let it be known, in true showman's style, that the Twomley & Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie was doing all in its power to put out the fire.

Cap'n Bill Quigg and Louise ran to loosen the mules. It was a wonder the canalboat girl was not kicked to death she was so fearless. And the mules by this time were wildly excited.

Fortunately the fire had burned an outlet through the roof of the cabin and had not spread

to the stable. But the heat was growing in intensity and the smoke was blinding. Especially after Mr. Sorber began to throw on water to smother the blaze.

The mules were released without either the girl or her father being hurt. But John and Jerry could not be held. Immediately they tore away, raced over the narrow gangplank, and started across somebody's ploughed field at full gallop. They never had shown such speed since they had become known on the towpath.

Then Louise and her father could help put out the fire. Cap'n Bill, as well as the mules, actually showed some speed. He handed up buckets of water with Neale, and amid the encouraging shouts of the crowd across the canal, the fire was finally quenched. Mr. Sorber immediately seized the occasion as a good showman, or "ballyhoo," should.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he shouted, standing at the rail and bowing, flourishing his arm as though he were snapping the long whip lash he took into the ring with him, "this little exciting episode—this epicurean taste of the thrills to follow in the big tent—although of an impromptu nature, merely goes to show the versatility of Twomley and Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie, and our ability, when the unexpected happens, to grapple with circumstances and throw them, sir—throw them! That is what we did in this present thrilling happening. The fire is out.

Every spark is smothered. The Fire Demon no longer seeks to devour its prey. Ahem! Another and a more quenching element has driven the Fire Demon back to its last spark and cinder —and then quenched the spark and cinder! Now, ladies and gentlemen, having viewed this entirely impromptu and nevertheless exciting manifestation of Fire and Water, we hope that your attention will be recalled to the glories of the Twomley and Sorber Herculean Circus and Menagerie. The big show will begin in exactly twenty-two minutes, ladies and gentlemen. At that time I shall be happy to see you all in your places in our comfortable seats as I enter the ring for the grand entrance. I thank you, one and all!"

He bowed gracefully and retired a step just as Cap'n Bill Quigg kicked off the forward hatch-cover to let the smoke out of the hold. He let out something else—and so surprised was the canal-boatman, that he actually sprang back.

Two childish voices were shouting as loud as possible: "Let us out! Oh, let—us—o-o-out!"

"Come on, Dot!" Sammy Pinkney cried, seeing the opening above their heads. "We can get out now."

"And we'll get right off this horrid boat, Sammy," declared Dot. "I don't ever mean to go off and be pirates with you again—never. Me and my Alice-doll don't like it at all."

There was a rush for the open hatchway and a chorus of excited voices.

"There was a rush for the open hatchway and a chorus of excited voices"

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"Oh, Dot, Dot! Are you there, dear?" cried Ruth.

"You little plague, Sammy Pinkney!" gasped Agnes. "I've a mind to box your ears for you!"

"Easy, easy," advised Neale, who was dripping wet from his waist down. "Let us see if they are whole and hearty before we turn on the punishment works. Give us your hands, Dottie."

He lifted the little girl, still hugging her Alice-doll, out of the hold and kissed her himself before he put her into Ruth's arms.

"Come on up, now, Sammy, and take your medicine," Neale urged, stooping over the hatchway.

"Huh! Don't you kiss *me,* Neale O'Neil," growled Sammy, trying to bring the potatoes and the basket of fruit both up the ladder with him. "I'll get slobbered over enough when I get home —first."

"And what second?" asked Luke, vastly amused as well as relieved.

But Sammy was silent on that score. Nor did he ever reveal to the Corner House girls and their friends just what happened to him when he got back to his own home.

Mr. Sorber was shaking hands with them all in congratulatory mood. Cap'n Bill Quigg was lighting his pipe and settling down against the scorched side of the cabin to smoke. Dot was passed around like a doll, from hand to hand. Louise looked on in mild amazement.

"If I'd knowed that little girl was down in the hold, I sure would have had her out," she said to Neale. "My! ain't she pretty. And what a scrumptious doll!"

Dot saw the canalboat girl in her faded dress, and the lanky boatman, and she had to express her curiosity.

"Oh, please!" she cried. "Are you and that man pirates, like Sammy and me?"

"No," said Louise, wonderingly. "Pap's a Lutheran and I went to a 'piscopalean Sunday-school last winter."

The laugh raised by the excited party from the Corner House quenched any further curiosity on Dot's part. And just here Mr. Sorber suggested a most delightful thing.

"Now, Neale wants to come over to the dressing tent and put on something dry," said the ringmaster. "And on the way you can stop at that house yonder by the bridge and telephone home that you are all right and the young'uns have been found. Then you'll all be my guests at Twomley and Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie. The big show will commence in just fourteen minutes. Besides Scalawag wants to see his little mistress."

"Who is Scalawag?" was the chorused question.

"That pony, Uncle Bill?" asked Neale.

"Oh!" gasped Sammy Pinkney, quite himself

once more. "The calico pony with pink on him! Je-ru-sa-*lem!*"

"Exactly," agreed Mr. Sorber, answering all the queries with one word. Then he turned to little Louise Quigg, to add:

"That means you and your dad. You will be guests of the circus, too. Come on, now, Neale, turn your car around and hurry. I'm due to get into another ring suit—I always keep a fresh one handy in case of accident—and walk out before the audience in just—le's see—eleven minutes, now!"

That was surely a busy eleven minutes for all concerned. The Quiggs had to be urged a little to leave their canal boat again; but Beauty had faithfully remained aboard, even if she had gone to sleep at her post; so they shut her into the partly burned cabin to guard the few possessions that remained to them.

"We never did have much, and we ain't likely to ever have much," said the philosophical Louise. "We can bunk to-night in the hold, Pap. We couldn't find John and Jerry till morning, anyway. We might's well celebrate 'cause the old *Nancy Hanks* didn't *all* go up in smoke."

Luke telephoned the good news to the old Corner House that Dot and Sammy were found, safe and sound, and that they were all going to the circus. Poor Tess had to be satisfied with the promise that the long-expected pony would be at

Milton in a few days. News of the runaways' safety was carried quickly to the Pinkney cottage across Willow Street.

"It strikes me that these kids are getting rewarded instead of punished for running away," Luke observed to Ruth, when he returned from telephoning.

"But what can we do?" the girl asked him. "I am so glad to get Dot back that I could not possibly punish her. And I don't know that she did anything so very wrong. Nor do I believe she will do anything like it again."

"How about Sammy?" the collegian asked.

"To tell the truth," said honest Ruth, "from what they both say I fancy Dot urged Sammy to run away. I can't blame him if I don't blame her, can I?"

"They've got enough, I guess," chuckled Luke. "Two reformed pirates! Goodness! aren't kids the greatest ever?"

The escapade of Sammy and Dot had carried its own punishment with it. Ruth was right when she said that Dot would never yield to such a temptation again. She had learned something about running away. As for Sammy, he was more subdued than the Corner House girls had ever seen him before.

That is, he was subdued until they were in what Mr. Sorber called "a private box" at the ringside of the circus and things began to happen. Then, what small boy could remain subdued with the

joys and wonders of a real circus evolving before his eyes?

If the tents were dusty and patched, and some of the costumes as frayed and tarnished as they could be after two-thirds of a season's wear, all the glamour of the famous entertainment was here—the smell of the animals, the dancing dust in the lamplight, the flaring torches, the blaring of the band, the distant roaring of the lions being fed for the amusement of the spectators.

The grand entrance was a marvel to the children. The curveting horses, the gaily decked chariots, the daring drivers in pink and blue tights and the very pink-cheeked women in the wonderful, glittering clothes—all these things delighted Sammy and Dot as well as Louise Quigg, who had never in her cramped life seen such a show.

When Mr. Sorber entered in his fresh suit and cracked his whip, and the band began to play, Louise became absorbed. When the clowns leaped into the ring with a chorused: "Here we are again!" Dot and Sammy and Louise clutched hands without knowing it, and just "held on" to themselves and each other during most of the entertainment that followed.

But the greatest excitement for the smaller people in the private box occurred toward the end of the evening when a squad of ponies came in to do their tricks. There were black ponies and white, and dappled and red ponies; but the prettiest of all (both Dot and the gasping Louise

declared it) was the brown and cream colored Scalawag, with the pink nose and ears.

Sammy, feeling his superiority as a boy in most instances, even at the circus, dropped every appearance of calm when Neale pointed out Scalawag as the calico pony promised Tess and Dot by Uncle Bill Sorber.

"Oh, my granny!" gasped the youngster, his eyes fairly bulging, "you don't mean that's the pony I thought was like a Teddy bear?"

"That's the one the girls are going to have for their very own. Uncle Rufus has been building a stall in the far shed for it—next to Billy Bumps," Neale assured him.

"And it *is* chocolate and cream and *pink!*" exclaimed Sammy. He turned suddenly to Agnes. "Oh, I say, Aggie!" he shouted. "You *did* know all about what a calico pony was like, didn't you?"

Agnes herself was delighted with the pretty creature. Of course, he was awfully round and fat; but he appeared so funny and cute when he looked out at the audience from under his braided bang, that Scalawag quite endeared himself to all their hearts.

He was something of a clown in the troupe of ponies. He always started last when an order was given and when he had anything to do by himself he appeared "to really hate" to do it. Mr. Sorber seemed to get very angry, and he

lashed at the pony quite furiously and shouted at him, so that the little girls squealed.

But the whiplash only wound about Scalawag's neck and did not hurt him, while he put his head around and looked at the ringmaster when he shouted, as though to ask Uncle Bill Sorber: "What's your hurry?"

"He's almost the oldest live thing in the show," chuckled Neale to Luke. "I can remember him when I was a little fellow and was first taken into the ring as the 'Infantile Wonder of the Ages'. I rode Scalawag. He was so fat then that I couldn't have rolled off his back very easily.

"Nothing older with the show, I guess, except Monolith, the moth-eaten old elephant, and the big tortoise in the sideshow. They say the elephant's over a hundred, and some think the tortoise is two hundred years old. So they go Scalawag a little better in age."

At the end of the pony act Mr. Sorber made Scalawag do something that thrilled Dot so that she whispered to Agnes she thought she "*should* faint!" The ringmaster led the old pony right over in front of the private box, and while all the people looked on, he presented Scalawag to Dot and her absent sister, whom Mr. Sorber spoke of as "T'ressa."

"Ladies and gentlemen, and all friends," began the ringmaster. "Twomley and Sorber's Herculean Circus and Menagerie never does things by

halves. Even when we find ourselves obliged to get rid of one of our faithful pufformers we make provision for that pufformer's happy old age.

"Scalawag has always been a trial; but we have borne with him. We have stood his tricks and his laziness for these many moons—many moons, ladies and gentlemen. Now he is going to a good home for the rest of his lazy life where all the work, privations, et cetera of circus life will be but a memory in his equine mind. Scalawag! Salute your new mistress!"

The fat pony rose on his hind legs and pawed the air, seemingly looking straight at Dot. It was then the smallest Corner House girl thought surely she would faint.

CHAPTER XVIII

A LONG LOOK AHEAD

Before the Corner House party and their guests could get away in their automobile after the show, and before Cap'n Quigg and Louise had, in their bashful way, thanked the young folks from Milton for helping save the burning canalboat, Uncle Bill Sorber appeared to bid the party good-night.

Right then and there the ringmaster made a bargain with the captain of the *Nancy Hanks* to transport Scalawag to Milton on this return trip. The circus had shown at the home town of the Corner House girls while they were away on their motor trip earlier in the summer; so Mr. Sorber would not again be in Milton during the open season.

"Old Scalawag has done his last tricks in the ring to-night," the showman said. "I'd made my mind up to that before you young people appeared. And now we had a chance to make a little fancy business of it. I believe in advertising the circus in season and out. The papers will give us half a column at least to-morrow, what with the fire on that barge and the presentation of Scalawag to this little girlie here," and he shook hands again with Dot.

Dot was sound asleep before the car was off the circus field. She and Sammy slept most of the way home and, it was so late, when they arrived most of the congratulations and all the punishment due the youngsters was postponed.

To tell the truth, Dot rose the next morning with a vague feeling that the venture in piracy, as Luke Shepard for a long time called it, was something that had happened to her and Sammy in a dream. And the adults were all so glad that the affair had turned out happily that even scoldings were mild.

Sammy, however, had an interview with his father that next evening that made a deep impression upon the boy's mind.

For the first time Sammy began to understand that he had an influence upon other people—especially small people—that must be for good rather than ill. He was the older, and he should not have allowed Dot to lead him astray. Besides, it was not manly for a boy to encourage a little girl to do things that might bring her to harm.

"When I go off to be a real pirate," Sammy confessed later to Neale, "I ain't goin' to take a girl anyway. No more. My father says pirates that carried off women with 'em never came to a good end."

The flurry of excitement and anxiety regarding Dot and Sammy blew over as all similar things did. With Mrs. MacCall, one may believe that

there was seldom a day passed at the old Corner House that did not bring its own experiences of a startling nature. Aunt Sarah declared she was kept "in a fidgit" all the time by the children.

"I don't know what a fidgit is," Tess confessed; "but we've got to be careful what we do now for a while, Dottie."

"Why?" asked the little girl.

" 'Cause Aunt Sarah seems awfully uncomfortable when she's in one of those fidgits. Yesterday, when you were lost, she was walking up and down stairs and all over the house. She must have walked *miles!* I guess fidgits are wearing on her."

The older Corner House girls did not mean that their guests should feel neglected because of the excitement about the lost children. One day's planned amusement for Cecile and Luke Shepard was lost. The latter declared, however, that pursuing embryo pirates and saving burning canalboats, to say nothing of attending the circus, seemed to him to have made up a more or less interesting and exciting day.

Luke was making himself much liked by every member of the Corner House family. Even Aunt Sarah endured his presence with more than usual complacency. Agnes found him a most cheerful philosopher and friend. The little girls considered him, next to Neale O'Neil, to be the nicest boy they had ever known.

Mrs. MacCall had her say regarding Luke

Shepard, too. It was to Ruth, and the outburst came after the Scotch woman had ample time to consider and form her opinion of the young man.

"Hech, ma lassie! there's a time coming when all o' ye will be thinkin' o' young men, an' bringin' them to the hoose. Forbye it's natural ye should. But 'tis in ma mind, Ruthie, ye'll never find one more suited to ye than yon bonnie lad."

"Oh, Mrs. Mac!" gasped Ruth, blushing furiously, and she actually ran out of the room to escape the keen scrutiny of the old housekeeper.

The oldest Corner House girl was growing up. One could not doubt it. Agnes exclaimed one morning as she and Ruth were dressing:

"Why, Ruthie! you really are as big as the old girls now. Of course you are. You are just as much grown up as Carrie Poole—and *she's* engaged. And so is Elizabeth Forbes. And Annie Dudley will be married before Christmas. Oh, Ruthie! did you ever think of being married?"

"For goodness' sake, child!" ejaculated Ruth, hiding her face quickly from her pretty sister, "where is your sense?"

"My cents are where my dollars are," laughed Agnes. "I am talking just as good sense as you ever heard, Ruth Kenway. Of course, some day you will marry."

"What for?" snapped her sister, inclined to be a little piqued because of Agnes' insistence.

"To please yourself, I hope," Agnes said slyly. "But surely to please some man, my dear."

"I don't know any man I'd want to please—"

"Hush!" warned Agnes, who was looking out of the open window, and she said it with mischief dancing in her eyes. "There's Luke Shepard."

"What do you mean?" demanded Ruth, flaring up in haste, not at all like her usual placid self.

"Why—on the lawn. Luke is on the lawn, I was going to say," declared Agnes, making innocent eyes again. "Why so touchy?"

But her sister did not answer her. To tell the truth she was being worried a good deal by the family's interest in a matter which she considered should interest herself alone—and one other.

Of course she had gone out with boys before, had been brought home from parties, had been escorted from evening meetings. Boys had carried her books home from school, and invited her to entertainments, and all that. But Ruth had always been so busy—there were such a multitude of things she was interested in—that never a sentimental thought had entered her head about any of these young swains.

If any of them had been inclined to have what the slangy Agnes called a "crush" on Ruth, they had quickly discovered that she had no use for that sort of thing. She made friends of boys as she made friends of girls—and that was all. And, really, she had never cared greatly to go out much or be with boys. She only had endured Neale about the house—or so she believed—because he

was useful and really was a remarkably domestic boy.

Ruth's mental attitude toward men was rapidly changing. She had never in her life before thought so much about boys, or young men, as she had during this week that Luke Shepard remained at the house with his sister. He seemed quite unlike any other person that Ruth had ever known before.

They were much together. Not, seemingly, by any plan on either side. But if Ruth took her sewing to the front porch, like enough she would find Luke there reading. Cecile and Agnes were clattering off at all hours to shop, or go to the motion picture shows, or visit Agnes' friends.

If Luke had anything to do at all, usually it was more convenient to do it in the company of the eldest Corner House girl. And wherever they met, or whatever they did, Ruth and Luke found plenty of subjects for conversation.

Never out of topics for small talk, were they, no indeed! And the most interesting things to say to each other! Of course, each was deeply interested in whatever seemed of moment to the other.

Not having known each other for very long, Ruth and Luke had to learn many things about each other which they would have known as a matter of course had they been brought up as neighbors. They wanted to learn each other's likes and dislikes on a multitude of questions. Then they

deferred to each other's tastes in a way that at first amazed the other people in the house and then secretly amused them.

That is, Mrs. MacCall, Agnes, and Neale were amused. Tess merely said seemingly apropos of nothing at all:

"Our Ruthie never did like boys before. But I guess Mr. Luke must be different."

"He isn't as nice as Neale," Dot proclaimed, loyal to the older friend, "but I like him."

Mr. Howbridge chanced to call—or was it chance? At any rate, he met Luke Shepard and his sister and seemed to approve of both of them.

"Your young friends are remarkably attractive, I am sure, Ruth," the lawyer said, with twinkling eyes as he was going. "Let me see, there's no danger yet of a dowry being wanted out of that idle money we are going to have—for Agnes, for instance?"

Ruth blushed furiously. She was getting that habit, it seemed, of late.

"I do wish, Mr. Howbridge, that you wouldn't joke so—"

"On such very serious subjects?" he interposed.

"It would be very serious indeed if our Agnes thought of such things. At her age!"

"True. And, of course, nobody else in this house could possibly bear such a thing in mind. Good-bye, my dear. Of course, if anything should happen, let me know at once."

"Oh, everything is all right now, Mr. How-

bridge,'' said Ruth, ignoring his insinuations. ''I am sure the roof will not leak now that the roofers have been here. And, as you say, the painting of the house would better go until late in the fall.''

He shook his finger at her as he went out of the door.

''You are a very bright young lady, Ruth Kenway.''

''Boy,'' said Cecile to her brother, ''you are getting in deep.''

''And glad of it,'' growled Luke, knowing full well what she meant.

''But what about Neighbor?''

''I am going to see Neighbor,'' declared the young man, looking very uncomfortable but decisive. ''I'm not going to be a cad.''

''You couldn't be that, Luke,'' she told him.

''Oh, yes, I could. I have been tempted,'' Luke said.

''Tempted to do what—to say what?''

''To try and make Ruth Kenway like me and let me tell her how very fond I am of her without a thought for the future, Sis.''

''Oh, Luke! You are looking so very far ahead.''

''I know it. And with the prospect I have without Neighbor's help, it would be looking very, very far indeed. I would be wrong to try to tie up any girl so long. I've fought that all out. I won't do it.''

"But what will you do?" asked his sister, grieving for him in both voice and look.

"See Neighbor the moment we get home. I'll put it to him straight. I'll be no man's slave and for no amount of money. If he will see it in the right light I shall stop off here at Milton on my way to college, and just tell Ruth all about it."

"And if Neighbor will not listen to reason?"

"Then I must not speak to Ruth," the young man said bitterly, and turned abruptly away from her.

"Yes. But," murmured Cecile, "will that be kind to Ruth? I wonder!"

CHAPTER XIX

SCHOOL BEGINS

Mr. Sorber was a man of his word. Scalawag arrived at the Corner House before the end of the week.

Dot had told Tess so much about the beauties of the fat little creature that the older sister could scarcely wait to see the pony.

"I almost wish I'd run away to be a pirate myself with Sammy Pinkney, just to see that pony do his tricks in the ring," Tess declared, with a sigh of envy.

"Oh, no, you wouldn't! No, you wouldn't, Tess Kenway!" Dot hastened to say. "We had just a *nawful* time. Hiding in that dark hole—"

"Hold, Dot—hold!" reminded Tess.

"Well, it *was* a hole—so there!" her little sister said. "And there were rats in it—and maybe worse things. Only they didn't bite us."

With Scalawag, the calico pony, came Louise Quigg and her father. The *Nancy Hanks* had been moored near Meadow Street again and the canalboatman and his little girl had brought the pony ashore and led him to his new home.

"Oh, you beautiful!" cried Tess, and hugged Scalawag around the neck.

The entire Corner House family—and some of the neighbors—gathered to greet the little girls' new pet. Scalawag stood very placidly and accepted all the petting that they wished to shower upon him.

"He eats it up!" laughed Neale, poking the pony in his fat side. "You old villain! you've certainly struck a soft snap now."

Scalawag brushed flies and wagged his ears knowingly. Tom Jonah came up to him and they companionably "snuffed noses," as Sammy said. But Billy Bumps had to be kept at a distance, for he showed a marked desire to butt the new member of the Corner House family of pets.

Louise and her father were entertained very nicely by the little girls and Sammy. Cap'n Bill Quigg was a simple-minded man, after all; he did not seem to deserve the bad name that the crabbed old lock-keeper had given him. He might have been slow and shiftless; but he was scarcely any more grown up than little Louise herself.

Ruth Kenway, now that her mind was less disturbed than it had been the evening when they had been searching for Sammy and Dot, gave more of her attention to the neglected canalboat girl. She planned then and there to do something worth while for Louise Quigg; and in time these plans of the oldest Corner House girl bore fruit.

On Saturday the Shepards went back to Grantham, for the next week Cecile and Luke would go to their respective schools. Luke bade Ruth

good-bye in public. He sought no opportunity of speaking to her alone. If the girl felt any surprise at this she did not show her feeling—or anything save kindly comradery—while speeding the parting guests.

Again on Saturday night the young folks gathered for study in the Corner House sitting-room. There had been very little time during this last week of the long vacation to look at school books.

It is pretty hard to settle down to study after so long an absence from textbooks. Agnes actually wrinkled her pretty forehead in a scowl when she opened her school books.

"What does the doctor say is mostly the matter with you, Aggie?" demanded Neale O'Neil, chuckling at her somber expression of countenance.

"I don't know," growled Agnes—if a girl with such a sweet voice could be said to growl. "It must be something awful. He asked to see my tongue and then he said, 'Overworked!' "

"He was perfectly correct, dear child," Ruth said. "Do give it a rest."

"And we'll all rest if you do," Neale added.

"You're all so smart!" cried Agnes. "And Neale O'Neil never did appreciate me. He is going to grow up to be a woman-hater—like that man Cecile Shepard told us about, who lives next door to them in Grantham."

"Oh, yes—Neighbor," Ruth murmured.

"I know," said Dot cheerfully. "The misogynist."

"*What?*" gasped Tess, staring at her little sister who had mouthed the word so deftly. "I never, Dot! What *is* that? It—it sounds—Why, Dot!"

The astonishment of the whole family at the way in which the smallest girl had said the word had pleased Dot greatly. She quite preened and tossed her head.

"Oh, Mr. Luke taught it to me," she admitted. "He said it was such a jaw-breaker that he was afraid I'd have a bad accident if I tried to say it without being told just how. It's a real nice word, I think. Much nicer than efficatacious. That's another word I've learned to say."

They laughed at her then and Dot's sudden pride was quenched.

Sammy was almost the only earnest student on this evening. He had met some of his boy schoolmates during the past week and he found that he desired very much to be with them in the grade they were making.

"I bet I can make it if they do," he said. "Anyway, my head's just empty of studying now, so it ought to hold a lot. I'll cram it chock full of the stuff in these books and then I won't have to work so hard by and by," he added, evidently with the hope that he might obtain education by the occasional cart-load, instead of by driblets.

Neale and Agnes were still "scrapping" in their own peculiar way. The beauty accused Neale again of being a harsh critic.

"You never do say a good word about any of my friends," she declared.

"He's wise in not doing so," laughed Ruth. "Then there will be no starting point for jealousy."

"*Now* you've said something!" declared Neale.

"Humph! He wouldn't know a real sweet girl if he met one," Agnes said.

"Oh, yes. I know a sweet girl," the ex-circus boy said with twinkling eyes.

"Who is she?"

"Carrie Mel," returned Neale quietly.

"Carrie *Who?*" demanded Agnes, while the little folks, too, pricked up their ears.

"And there's that very pleasant girl—Jenny Rosity," the boy said with a perfectly serious face. "And I'm sure that Ella Gant is one of the very best of girls—"

Agnes giggled.

"What do you mean? Who are you talking about?" asked Dot, much puzzled. "Are they friends of Aggie and Ruthie? I never heard of that Carrie—What did you say her name was?"

"The sweet girl? Oh! Carrie Mel," said Neale.

And Jenny Rosity and Ella Gant. Who are *they?*"

"Then there's that very lively girl, Annie Mation," pursued Neale, racking his brain to discover other punning words. "And despite her superabundance of avoirdupois, Ellie Phant cannot be overlooked."

"Well, I never! *Elephant!*" gasped Tess. "And caramel!"

"And elegant and generosity," added Agnes.

"Don't forget Annie Mation," said Neale, grinning. "She's a lively one. But Annie Mosity is one of the most disagreeable girls I ever met."

From that they began making out lists of such punning names, including Amelia Ration, E. Lucy Date, Polly Gon, Hettie Rodoxy, Jessie Mine, Sarah Nade, and dozens of others, even searching out "Mr. Dick" to help them in this remarkably erudite task.

Finally Ruth called them to time and warned them that the evening was supposed to be spent in serious study.

"Monday we must all go to school," she said, for even she was to take several studies during the coming term, although she did not mean to attend recitations full time at the Milton high school.

"Let us be able to answer a few questions intelligently."

"I guess," said Tess, "we won't any of us be as ignorant as one of the boys was in my class last term. It wasn't Sammy, for he was home sick, you know," she hastened to add, fearful that Sammy Pinkney might suspect her of "telling on him."

"Who was it then?" asked Sammy.

"No. I'll only tell you what he said," Tess declared, shaking her head. " 'Cause I guess he knows more now. The teacher read us a lot about

hist'ry. You know, things that happened to folks away back, and what they did. You know about the Pilgrims, don't you, Sammy?"

"Sure," said Sammy. "They brought over from England all that old furniture Mrs. Adams has got in her parlor. She told me so."

"Were—were the Pilgrims furniture movers?" asked Dot, as usual in search of exact information. "I know a little girl whose father owns a moving van."

Tess tried to continue her story after the laughter subsided. "Anyway, teacher told us how the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock and how it looked and what they engraved on a plate and put there; but this little boy wasn't paying much attention I guess."

"Why? What did he do, Tess?" asked Sammy.

"She told us all to draw a picture of Plymouth Rock, just as she had described it; and while we were all trying to that boy didn't draw a thing. Teacher asked him why he didn't draw Plymouth Rock, and he said:

" 'Teacher, I don't know whether you want us to draw a hen or a rooster.' Now, wouldn't you think he was ignorant?" she demanded amid the laughter of the family.

They settled down at last to work, and before Neale and Sammy went home each of the party was prepared in some measure, at least, to face the teachers' first grilling regarding the previous term's work.

Ruth busied herself more and more about the domestic affairs of the big house. Mrs. MacCall could not do it all, nor did Ruth wish her to.

The oldest Corner House girl was becoming a modern as well as an enthusiastic housekeeper. She read and studied not a little in domestic science and had been even before they came to live in Milton a good, plain cook. Mr. Howbridge had once called her "Martha" because she was so cumbered with domestic cares. Ruth, however, had within her a sincere love for household details.

Mrs. MacCall, who was almost as sparing of praise as Aunt Sarah at most times, considered Ruth a wonder.

"She'll mak' some mannie a noble wife," the Scotch woman declared, with both pride and admiration in "Our Ruth."

"But he'll not deserve her," snapped Aunt Sarah, rather in disparagement of any man, however, than in praise of Ruth.

Now that Luke and his sister were gone, the housekeeper watched Ruth more keenly, even, than before. The good woman was evidently amazed, after the close association of Ruth and Luke, that nothing had come of it.

If the eldest of the four Kenway sisters felt any disappointment because Luke Shepard had gone away without saying anything in private to her regarding his hopes and aspirations, she showed none of that disappointment in her manner or appearance.

Save that she seemed more sedate than ever.

That might be natural enough, however. Even Mrs. MacCall admitted that Ruth was growing up.

"And I should like to know if we're not all growing up?" Agnes demanded, overhearing Mrs. McCall repeat the above statement. Agnes had come down into the kitchen on Monday morning, ready for school.

"I should say we were! Ruth won't let me 'hoo-hoo' from the window to Neale for him to come and take my books. Says it isn't ladylike, and that I am too old for such tomboy tricks. So," and the roguish beauty whispered this, "I am under the necessity of climbing the back fence into Mr. Con Murphy's yard to get at Neale," and she ran off to put this threat into immediate execution.

CHAPTER XX

BEARDING THE LION

Luke Shepard went back to Grantham with Cecile in a mood that caused his sympathetic sister to speak upon mere commonplace subjects and scarcely mention the friends with whom they had spent the week. She knew Luke was plowing deep waters, and whether his judgment was wise or not, she respected his trouble.

The young man believed he had no right to present his case to Ruth Kenway if he had no brighter prospects for a future living than what he could make by his own exertions. Necessarily for some years after leaving college this would be meager. Without his elderly friend's promised aid how could he ask the oldest Corner House girl to share his fortunes?

As for tying her to a long engagement—the most heart-breaking of all human possibilities—the young man would not do it. He told himself half a hundred times an hour that the thought could merely be born into his mind of his own selfishness.

The Kenways had suffered enough in poverty in the past. He knew all about their hard life after Mr. Kenway had died, for Ruth had told

him of it herself. Until Luke could get into business after his college days were ended and make good, he would have little to offer Ruth Kenway of either luxuries or comforts.

So, the young fellow told himself, it all depended upon Neighbor Northrup, who had promised to do so much for him, provided Luke gave no sign of desiring the company of a wife through life.

"He's just a ridiculous, crabbed old man," Luke told himself. "I never paid much attention to Neighbor's crotchets before I met Ruth. Didn't suppose I'd ever really care enough about a girl to risk displeasing him.

"Of course, he's been awfully kind to me—and promises to be kinder. I believe I am named in his will. Yet, I wonder if it's much to brag of for a fellow with all his limbs sound, presumably his share of brains, and all that, to be expecting a lift-up in the world. Maybe I'm rather leaning back on the old gentleman's promises instead of looking ahead to paddling my own canoe. Anyway I'm not going to spoil my whole life just because of such nonsense."

Luke Shepard felt immensely superior at this time to Mr. Northrup with his crotchets and foibles. The latter's rooted objection to women seemed to the young collegian the height of folly.

Aunt Lorena's was quite a little house beside Mr. Henry Northrup's abode. Whereas the flower-beds, and hedge, and the climbing roses about the spinster's cottage made a pleasant picture,

the old Northrup house was somber indeed. The bachelor's dwelling, with its padlocked front gate, did not look cheerful enough to attract even a book agent.

For some years Luke had spent quite as much time on Neighbor's premises as he had with his aunt and Cecile. There were many little things he could do for the old man that the latter could not hire done. Samri, as the Japanese butler was called, could not do everything.

Arriving at Grantham in the late afternoon, Luke stopped only a moment to greet Aunt Lorena before hurrying across the line fence into Neighbor's yard.

"For the good land's sake!" sighed Miss Shepard, who was very precise, if not dictatorial, "it does seem as though that boy might stay with us a minute. Off he has to go at once to Neighbor. You would think they were sweethearts—Luke and that crabbed old fellow."

Cecile winced. "Luke has something on his mind, Auntie—something that he thinks he must tell Neighbor at once," and she, too, sighed. "Oh, dear! how it is all coming out I really don't know. I am almost sorry we went to the Kenways' to visit."

"Why, Cecile! didn't they treat you nicely?"

"Splendidly. They are all dears—especially Ruthie. But it is because of her I am worried."

"Indeed?"

"She and Luke have become very friendly—oh,

entirely too friendly, if nothing is to come of it."

Aunt Lorena dearly loved a romance. Her eyes began to sparkle and a faint flush came into her withered cheek.

"You don't mean it, Sissy?" she gasped. "Not our Luke? The dear boy! Think of his having a sweetheart!"

"Oh, but I don't know that he *has* one! I am afraid he ought not even to think of it!" cried Cecile.

"Nonsense! Why not? Your father was married when he was no older than Luke. And of course the dear boy would wait till he graduates."

"And for a long time after, I fear," said Cecile, shaking her head. She really saw the folly of such an idea much more quickly than Aunt Lorena.

"Is this Ruth Kenway a nice girl?" queried Aunt Lorena eagerly. "And is Luke actually fond of her?"

"As fond as he can be I do believe," admitted the sister, still shaking her head.

"And—and do you suppose Miss Kenway appreciates our Luke?"

"I guess she likes him," said Cecile, smiling a little at the question. "I am sure she does, in fact. But Luke will say nothing to her unless Neighbor agrees."

"Mercy! He's not gone to tell that old man about the girl?"

"Of course."

"Well! Of all things! The ridiculous boy!" ejaculated Aunt Lorena. "He might know that Mr. Northrup will be greatly vexed. Why, he hates women!"

"Yes, I am afraid Luke will have a bad time with Neighbor," said Cecile, anxiously.

She was quite right in her supposition. Luke Shepard appeared before the grim old man as the latter sat in his study and, being a perfectly candid youth, he blurted out his news without much preparation. Immediately after shaking hands, and asking after Mr. Northrup's health, he said:

"Neighbor, I've got a great secret to tell you."

"Heh? A secret? What is it? Broke somebody's window, have you?" for his elderly friend often seemed to think Luke still a small boy.

"That wouldn't be a great secret," the young man said quietly. "No. It is the greatest thing that's ever come into my life."

The old man, who could look very sternly indeed from under his heavy brows, gazed now with apprehension at his young friend.

"You don't mean you think you've changed your mind about your college work?"

"No, sir. But there is one thing I want to do after I get through college that I never thought of doing before."

"What's the matter with you, boy?" demanded Mr. Northrup, exasperated.

"You know I have been away with Cecile to see

some friends of ours. And one of them, Miss Kenway—Ruth—is the nicest girl I ever met."

"A girl!" literally snorted Neighbor.

"Ruth Kenway is splendid," said Luke firmly. "She is lovely. And—and I think very, very much of her."

"What do you mean, boy?" the old man demanded, his deep-set eyes fairly flashing. "Why do you tell me about any silly girl? Don't you know that it offends me? I can, and do, endure your speaking of your sister. It is not your fault you have a sister. But it will be your fault if you ever allow yourself to become entangled with any other woman."

"But, Neighbor," said the young man desperately, "I couldn't help it. I tell you I admire Ruth Kenway immensely—immensely! I want to make her care for me, too. I want—I want—"

"The moon!" roared Mr. Northrup. "That's what you are crying for—like any baby. And you'll not get it—neither the moon nor the girl. What have I always told you? If you are fool enough to get mixed up with any girl, I wash my hands of you. Understand?"

"Yes," said Luke, flushing deeply during this tirade but holding his own temper admirably in check. "Yes, I understand. But I'd like to talk with you about it—"

"You can't talk to me about any girl!"

"But I must," insisted Luke. "You see, I—I

love her. And if I can possibly do it, I am going to win her for a wife—some day."

The old gentleman arose in anger.

"Do you mean to stand there and deliberately defy me?"

"I am not defying you, Neighbor; I'm only telling you," Luke said, rather doggedly, it must be confessed. But his own eyes were glowing.

"After my declaration to you that I will have nothing more to do with you if you fool with any girls—"

"I'm not!" snapped Luke. "It is only one girl. The best girl in the world. I wish you'd go to Milton to see her."

"Go to Milton? Indeed! I wouldn't go there—"

He stopped and glowered at Luke for a moment without speaking. Then he asked harshly:

"So this girl lives in Milton?"

"Yes, sir. At the old Corner House. And she is lovely—"

"Be still!" commanded the old man. "Young calf! Do you suppose *I* am interested in your protestations of silliness about a girl? I want to hear nothing more about it. You understand my wishes well enough. I will never do a thing for you after you graduate—I will strike you out of my will—I'll close my door against you, if you entangle yourself in any way with this girl."

"Oh, Neighbor!" murmured Luke sadly, step-

ping back from the old man's wildly gesturing arm.

"I mean it. I always mean what I say," declared Mr. Northrup. "You should know me well enough by this time. A girl—faugh! You trouble me any more about this girl—or any other—and I'll have nothing more to do with you."

"Very well, Mr. Northrup. Good-bye," said Luke, and turned toward the door.

"Where are you going, you young whippersnapper?" roared the old man.

"I have made up my mind. I will win Ruth if I can—though with my poor prospects I have no right to speak to her now. But it would not be right, when you feel as you do, for me to accept any further favors from you when I am determined in my heart to get Ruth in spite of you."

The door closed quietly behind him before the old man could utter another word. He stared at the door, then sat down slowly and his face lost its angry color.

Mr. Henry Northrup was apparently both pained and amazed. Perhaps he was mostly confused because Luke Shepard had taken him quite at his word.

CHAPTER XXI

ADVENTURES WITH SCALAWAG

Dot came home to the old Corner House the first day of the school term with what Neale O'Neil would have called "serious trouble in the internal department." She was ravenously hungry; and yet she had eaten a good lunch and did not like to demand of Mrs. MacCall that bite between meals which was so abhorred by the Scotchwoman.

"You have no more right to eat 'twixt one meal and t'other by day than you have to demand a loonch in the middle of the night," was often the good woman's observation when she was asked for a mid-afternoon lunch.

Ruth was easier. She had not been brought up in the rigid, repressive school that had surrounded Mrs. MacCall's childhood. As for Linda, the Finnish girl, if she had her way she would be "stuffing" (to quote Mrs. MacCall) the children all the time.

"You sh'd train your stomach to be your clock, child," Mrs. MacCall declared on this occasion, after Dot had finally mustered up her courage to ask for the lunch.

"I try to, Mrs. Mac," said the smallest Corner House girl apologetically. "But sometimes my stomach's fast."

That started the ball rolling that evening, and the dinner table proved to be a hilarious place. But Ruth was very quiet and her countenance carried a serious cast that might have been noticed had the others not all been so gay and excited. The first day of the term is always an exciting time. Everything about the school—even old things—seems strange.

Dot had of course learned to write as well as to read; and indeed she wrote a very plain and readable hand. Even Mrs. MacCall could see it "without her specs."

"I do abominate these folks whose handwriting is so fine that I have to run to get my glasses to know whether it's an invitation to tea or to tell me some bad news," the housekeeper declared, in discussing Dot's improved writing.

The little girl was passing around a paper on which she had copied a sentence that her teacher had written on the blackboard just before closing hour that day. With an idea of testing the children's knowledge of English, the teacher had written the line and told her class to think it over and, in the morning, bring her the sentence rewritten in different words, but retaining the original meaning.

It was the old proverb: "A wink is as good as a nod to a blind horse."

"Of course, I know what it *means,*" Dot said. "If a horse is blind he wouldn't see you nodding or winking. And winking isn't polite, anyway—Ruth says it isn't."

"Correct, Dottums," Agnes agreed. "It is very bad and bold to wink—especially at the boys."

"Wouldn't it be impolite to wink at a horse, too, Aggie?" asked the puzzled Dot. "Don't you think Scalawag would feel he was insulted if I wunk at him?"

"Oh, my eye!" gasped Neale, who chanced to be at hand. "Wink, wank, wunk. Great declension, kid."

"Don't call me 'kid'!" cried Dot. "I am sure *that* is not polite, Neale O'Neil."

"Discovered, Neale!" chuckled Agnes.

"You are right, Dottie," said the boy, with a twinkle in his eye. "And to repay you for my slip in manners, I will aid you in transposing that sentence so that your teacher will scarcely recognize it."

And he did so. It greatly delighted Dot, for she did so love polysyllables. The other members of the family were convulsed when they read Neale's effort. The little girl carried the paper to school the next day and the amazed teacher read the following paraphrase of "A wink is as good as a nod to a blind horse:"

"A spasmodic movement of the eye is as adequate as a slight motion of the cranium to an

equine quadruped devoid of its visionary capacities."

"Goodness!" Tess declared when she had heard this read over several times. "I don't think you would better read that to Scalawag, Dot. It would make any horse mad."

"Scalawag isn't a horse," responded her sister. "He's a pony. And Neale says he'll never grow up to be a horse. He's just always going to be our cute, cunning little Scalawag!"

"But suppose," sighed Tess, thoughtfully, "that he ever acts like that brown pony of Mrs. Heard's. Jonas, you know."

"Oh, Jonas! He is a *bad* pony. He gets stuck and won't go," Dot said. "Our Scalawag wouldn't do that."

"He balks, Dot—balks," reproved Tess. "He doesn't get stuck."

"I don't care. You can't push him, and you can't pull him. He just stands."

"Until our Neale whispers something in his ear," suggested Tess.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed her little sister. "Suppose Scalawag *should* be taken that way. What *would* we do? We don't know what Neale whispered to Mrs. Heard's pony."

"That's so," agreed Tess. "And Neale won't tell me. I've asked him, and *asked* him! He was never so mean about anything before."

But Neale, with a reassuring smile, told the little girls that Scalawag would never need to

be whispered to. In fact, whispering to the calico pony would merely be a waste of time.

"There's nothing the matter with the old villain but inborn laziness," the youth chuckled. "You have to shout to Scalawag, not whisper to him."

"Oh!" murmured Tess, "don't call him a villain. He is so pretty."

"And cute," added Dot.

Uncle Rufus had built him a nice box stall and Neale took time early each morning to brush and curry the pony until his coat shone and his mane was "crinkly."

Before the week was out, too, the basket phaeton arrived and a very pretty russet, nickel-trimmed harness. Even the circus trimmings had never fitted Scalawag better than this new harness, and he tossed his head and pawed, as he had been trained to do, arching his neck and looking just as though he were anxious to work.

"But it's all in his looks," observed Neale. "He doesn't mean it."

Which seemed to be the truth when the two little girls and Sammy Pinkney got into the phaeton with Neale and took their first drive about the more quiet residential streets of Milton.

Scalawag jogged along under compulsion; but to tell the truth he acted just as though, if he had his own choice, he would never get out of a walk.

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" muttered Sammy. "It's lucky we don't want to go anywhere in a hurry."

It was great fun to drive around the Parade

Ground and see the other children stare. When Sammy was allowed to hold the lines he sat up like a real coachman and was actually too proud for speech.

The responsibilities of his position immediately impressed the embryo pirate. Neale taught him carefully how to drive, and what to do in any emergency that might arise. Scalawag was an easy-bitted pony and minded the rein perfectly. The only danger was the pony's slowness in getting into action.

"I reckon," declared Neale, with some disgust, "if there was a bomb dropped behind him, old Scalawag wouldn't get out of the way quick enough, even if there was a five-minute time fuse on the bomb."

"Well, I guess he'll never run away then," said Tess, with a sigh of satisfaction. Nothing could be said about Scalawag that one or the other of the two little girls could not find an excuse for, or even that the criticism was actually praise.

"One thing you want to remember, children," Neale said one day, earnestly. "If you're ever out with Scalawag without me, and you hear a band playing, or anything that sounds like a band, you turn him around and beat it the other way."

"All right," responded the little girls.

"What for?" asked Sammy, at once interested.

"Never mind what for. You promise to do as

I say, or it's all off. You'll get no chance to drive the girls alone."

"Sure, I'll do what you say, Neale. Only I wondered what for. Don't he like band music?"

But Neale, considering it safer to say nothing more, merely repeated his warning.

The children drove out every pleasant afternoon when school was over, and within the fortnight Sammy and Tess and Dot were going about Milton with the pony through the shady and quiet streets, as though they had always done so. Therefore the older Corner House girls and Neale could take their friends to drive in the motor-car, without crowding in the two smaller children.

The "newness" of the automobile having worn off for Tess and Dot, they much preferred the basket carriage and the fat pony. They, too, could take their little friends driving, and this added a feeling of importance to their pleasure in the pony.

Had Tess had her way every sick or crippled child in town would have ridden behind the calico pony. She wanted at once to go to the Women's and Children's Hospital, where their very dear friend, Mrs. Eland, had been matron and for the benefit of which *The Carnation Countess* had been given by the school children of Milton, and take every unfortunate child, one after another, out in the basket carriage.

Their schoolmates especially had to be invited

to ride, and Sadie Goronofsky from Meadow Street, and Alfredia Blossom, Uncle Rufus' granddaughter, were not neglected.

"I do declare!" said Aunt Sarah, with some exasperation, as she saw the pony and cart, with its nondescript crew, start off one afternoon for a jog around the Parade Ground. "I do declare! What riffraff Tess manages to pick up. For she certainly must be the biggest influence in gathering every rag, tag and bobtail child in the neighborhood. I never did see such a youngster."

"It isn't that Tessie's tastes are so heterodox," Ruth said, smiling quietly, "but her love for others is so broad."

"Humph!" snapped Aunt Sarah. "It's a wonder to me the child hasn't brought smallpox into the family from going as she does to those awful tenements on Meadow Street."

Aunt Sarah had always been snobbish in her tendencies, even in her days of poverty; and since she enjoyed the comforts and luxuries of the old Corner House it must be confessed that this unpleasant trait in the old woman's character had been considerably developed.

"The only tenements she goes to on Meadow Street are our own," Ruth replied with vigor. "If they are conducted so badly that diseases become epidemic there, *we* shall be to blame—shall we not?"

"Oh, don't talk socialism or political economy to *me!*" said Aunt Sarah. "Thank goodness

when *I* went to school young girls did not fill their heads with such nonsense."

"But when she went to school," Ruth said afterward to Mrs. MacCall, "girls I am sure learned to be charitable and loving. And that is all our Tess is, after all."

"Bless her sweet heart!" exclaimed the housekeeper. "She'll never be hurt by that, it's true. But she does bring awfully queer looking characters to the hoose, Ruth. There's no gainsaying that."

As the children met these other children at the public school, Ruth could not see why the Goronofskys and the Maronis and the Tahnjeans, and even Petunia Blossom's pickaninnies, should not, if they were well behaved, come occasionally to the old Corner House. Nor did she forbid her little sisters taking their schoolmates to ride in the basket phaeton, for the calico pony could easily draw all that could pile into the vehicle.

The children from Meadow Street, and from the other poorer quarters of the town, always appeared at the Kenway domicile dressed in their best, and scrubbed till their faces shone. The parents considered it an honor for their children to be invited over by Tess and Dot.

Sammy, of course, would have found it much more agreeable to drive alone with some of the boys than with a lot of the little girls; but he was very fair about it.

"I can't take you 'nless Tess says so," he said

to Iky Goronofsky. "I'm only let to drive this pony; I don't own him. Tess and Dot have the say of it."

"And all the kids is sponging on them," grunted Iky, who always had an eye to the main chance. "You know what I would do if the pony was mine?"

"What would you do, Iky?" asked Sammy.

"I'd nefer let a kid in the cart without I was paid a nickel. Sure! A nickel a ride! And I would soon make the cost of the harness and the cart. That's what my father would do too."

Both of which statements were probably true. But the little Corner House girls had no thought for business. They were bent upon having a good time and giving their friends pleasure.

The pony was not being abused in any sense. The work was good for him. But possibly Uncle Bill Sorber had not looked forward to quite such a busy time for Scalawag when he told him in confidence that he was going to have an easy time of it at the old Corner House. If Scalawag could have seen, and been able to speak with, the old ringmaster just then the pony would doubtless have pointed out an important error in the above statement.

Scalawag was petted and fed and well cared for. But as the fall weather was so pleasant, each afternoon he was put between the shafts and was made to haul noisy, delighted little folk about the Parade Ground.

They did not always have company in these drives, however. Sometimes only Tess and Dot were in the basket carriage, though usually Sammy was along. Once in a while they went on errands for Mrs. MacCall—to the store, or to carry things to sick people. The clatter of Scalawag's little hoofs became well known upon many of the highways and byways of Milton.

Once they drove to the Women's and Children's Hospital with a basket of home-made jellies and jams that Mrs. MacCall had just put up and which Ruth wished to donate to the convalescents in the institution. For after the departure of Mrs. Eland and her sister, Miss Peperill, for the West, the Corner House Girls had not lost their interest in this charitable institution.

At a corner which they were approaching at Scalawag's usual jog trot were several carriages, a hearse with plumes, and some men in uniform. Sammy had the reins on this day.

"Oh, Sammy," said Tess, "we'll have to wait, I guess. It's Mr. Mudge's funeral—Mr. Peter Mudge, you know. He was a Grand Army man, and all the other Grand Army men will help bury him. There! Hear the band?"

Of a sudden, and with a moaning of wind instruments punctuated by the roll of drums, the band struck into a dirge. The procession moved. And all of a sudden Sammy found that Scalawag was marking time just as he had been taught to do in the circus ring to any music.

"Oh, my!" gasped Dot, "what is the matter with Scalawag?"

"Turn him around, Sammy—please do," begged Tess. "Just see him! And he's following the band."

That is just exactly what the pony intended to do. Sammy could not turn him. He would mind neither voice nor the tugging rein. Arching his neck, tossing his mane, and stepping high in time to the droning music, the calico pony turned the corner and followed on at the rear of the procession.

"Why—why," gasped Dot, "I don't want to go to a funeral. You stop him, Sammy Pinkney."

"Can't we turn him up a side street, Sammy?" whispered Tess.

Everybody was looking from the sidewalk and from the houses they passed. It was a ridiculous situation. The solemn, slow notes of the band seemed just suited to Scalawag's leisurely action. He kept perfect time.

"And they're goin' to march clear out to the Calvary Cemetery!" ejaculated Sammy. "It's four miles!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE GREEN UMBRELLA AGAIN

"Boom! Boom! Boom-te-boom!" rolled the solemn drums, and Scalawag in a sort of decorous dance, keeping perfect time, insisted upon following the procession.

"My goodness me, Sammy Pinkney!" gasped Tess. "This is awful! Everybody's laughing at us! *Can't* you turn him around?"

"Oh, dear! He won't turn around, or do anything else, till that band stops," declared Sammy. "This is what Neale meant. He thinks he's in the circus again and that he must march to the music."

"I do declare," murmured Dot, "this pony of ours is just as hard to make *stop* as Mrs. Heard's Jonas-pony is hard to make *go*. I wish it was Jonas we had here now, don't you, Tess? He'd be glad to stop."

"And Ruthie told us to come right back 'cause there's going to be ice-cream, and we can scrape the paddles," moaned Tess. "Dear me! we'll be a *nawful* long time going out to this fun'ral!"

The situation was becoming tragic. The thought of the pleasures of scraping the ice-cream

freezer paddles was enough to make Sammy turn to desperate invention for release.

"Here, Tess," he commanded. "You hold these reins and don't you let 'em get under Scalawag's heels."

"Oh, Sammy! what are you going to do?" queried Tess excitedly, but obeying him faithfully.

"I'm going to slide out behind and run around and stop him."

"Oh, Sammy! You can't!" Dot cried. "He'll just walk right over you. See him!"

Everybody along the street was laughing now. It really was a funny sight to see that solemnly stepping pony right behind the line of carriages. Sammy would not be deterred. He scrambled out of the phaeton and ran around to Scalawag's head.

"Whoa! Stop, you old nuisance!" ejaculated the boy, seizing the bridle and trying to halt the pony.

But the latter knew his business. He had been taught to keep up his march as long as the band played. If it had suddenly changed to a lively tune, Scalawag would have stood right up on his hind legs and pawed the air!

Therefore, the pony had no idea of stopping while the band played on. He pushed ahead and Sammy had to keep stepping backward or be trod on. It was a funny sight indeed to see the small boy try to hold back the fat pony that plowed

along just as though Sammy had no more weight than a fly.

"Oh Sammy! he'll step on you," Tess cried.

"Oh, Sammy! he'll—he'll bite you," gasped Dot.

"Oh, Sammy!" bawled a delighted youngster from the sidewalk, "he'll swaller you whole!"

"Look out for that pony, boy!" called an old man.

"What's the kid trying to do—wrastle him?" laughed another man.

Tess' cheeks were very, very red. Sammy wished that the street might open and swallow him. Dot was too young to feel the smart of ridicule quite so keenly. She hugged up the Alice-doll to her bosom and squealed just as loud as she could.

After all, Dot was the one who saved the situation. Her shrill cry was heard by an old gentleman in the last carriage. He was a very grand looking old gentleman indeed, for when he stood up to look down upon the obstinate pony and the small boy struggling with him, as well as the two little girls in the basket phaeton, they saw that he had medals and ribbons on his breast and a broad sash across the front of his coat.

"Halt!" commanded General MacKenzie, and although he was at the rear of the procession instead of the front, the word was passed swiftly along to the band, and everybody stood still, while the droning of the instruments ceased.

Instantly Scalawag stopped keeping time, and shook his head and coughed. Sammy had pulled at his bit so hard that it interfered with the pony's breathing.

"What under the sun's the matter with that little pony?" demanded the veteran officer, putting on his eyeglasses the better to see Scalawag and the whole outfit.

"If you pl-please, sir," stammered Sammy, "he belongs to a circus and—and he just can't make his feet behave when he hears a band."

"And do you children belong to a circus, too?" asked the old gentleman in vast surprise.

"Oh, no, sir," Tess put in. "And Scalawag doesn't belong to one now. But he can't forget. If you'll have your band wait, please, until we can drive up this other street, Scalawag will forget all about it."

"Please do, sir," begged Dot. "For we don't really want to go to the seminary; we go to school here in Milton," which peculiar association of ideas rather stagged General MacKenzie.

However, amid the subdued hilarity of the people on the sidewalks, Sammy managed at last to turn Scalawag's head and drive him up Buchan Terrace, and out of hearing of the droning of the band when the funeral procession started again. But it certainly was a memorable occasion for the little mistresses of Scalawag and for Sammy.

Thereafter, when they were driving out, they were continually on the watch for a band, or any other music; and Dot even feared that the old man on the corner who attracted attention to his infirmities, as well as to the pencils he sold, with a small organette, would play some tune that would remind Scalawag of his circus days.

Neale O'Neil would sometimes bring the pony around to the front of the house and have Agnes start a band record on the music machine in the parlor. Immediately Scalawag would try to go through his old tricks to the delight of the neighborhood children.

"Well! it doesn't much matter, I suppose," Ruth sighed. "Every day is circus day at the old Corner House. We have gained a reputation for doing queer things, and living not at all like other folks. I wonder that nice people here in Milton allow their children to play with our little girls."

"Hech!" exclaimed Mrs. MacCall. "I should like to know why not? They're the best behaved bairns anywhere, if their heids are fu' o' maggots," using the word, however, in the meaning of "crotchets" or "queer ideas."

Ruth was no "nagger." She was strict about some things with the smaller ones; but she never interfered with their plays or amusements as long as they were safe and did not annoy anybody. And with their multitude of pets and toys,

to say nothing of dolls galore, Tess and Dot Kenway were as happy little girls as could be found in a day's march.

Besides, there was always Sammy Pinkney to give them a jolt of surprise; although Sammy's mother said he was behaving this term almost like an angel and she feared a relapse of the fever he had suffered the spring before.

Neale O'Neil felt of the boy's shoulder blades solemnly and pronounced no sign yet of sprouting wings.

"You are in no danger of dying young because of your goodness striking in, Sammy," he said. "Don't lose heart."

"Aw—*you!*" grunted Sammy.

Ruth, seeing the practicability of it, was taking lessons in driving the automobile and was to get a license shortly. Agnes felt quite put out that she was not allowed to do likewise; but to tell the truth the older folk feared to let the fly-away sister handle the car without Neale, or somebody more experienced, in the seat with her.

"I don't care, Neale has killed a hen, scared innumerable dogs sleeping in the road-dust, and come near running down Mrs. Privett. You know he has! I believe I wouldn't do *much* worse."

Ruth pointed out that she need not do much worse in Mrs. Privett's case to have a very bad accident indeed.

"The difference between almost running a person down, and actually hitting him, can be

measured only before a magistrate," the older sister said.

Ruth took her lessons from the man at the garage after luncheon, for she did not attend school in the afternoon this term, taking the few studies she desired in the morning.

One afternoon she drove over to Mr. Howbridge's house for tea, and as the car jounced over the railroad crossing at Pleasant Street she suddenly spied a familiar looking object bobbing along the sidewalk. It was a huge green umbrella, and beneath it was the rather shambling figure of the old gentleman whom she had saved from possible accident at this very crossing some weeks before.

He was dressed quite as he had been when Ruth first saw him. If he saw her, the car passed so rapidly that she did not see him bow. At Mr. Howbridge's house she lingered for some time, for the lawyer always enjoyed these little visits of his oldest ward.

Ruth did not return to the old Corner House until almost time for the children to come home from school. Mrs. MacCall was in an excited state when the oldest Corner House girl appeared.

"Hech, ma lassie!" cried the housekeeper. "Ye hae fair missed the crankiest old body I've set my eyes on in mony a day!"

"Whom do you mean, Mrs. Mac?" asked Ruth, in surprise.

"Let me tell 't ye! I should be fu' used to

quare bodies coomin' here, for 'tis you bairns bring 'em. But this time 'twas ane o' *your* friends, Ruthie—"

"But who was he?"

"Fegs! He'd never tell 't me," Mrs. MacCall declared, shaking her head. "He juist kep' sayin' he had a reason for wishin' tae see ye. Ye could nae tell from lookin' into his winter-apple face, whether 'twas guid news or bad he brought."

"Oh, Mrs. Mac!" cried Ruth suddenly, "did he carry a green umbrella?"

"He did juist that," declared the woman, vigorously nodding. "And a most disreputable umbrella it looked tae be. 'Gin ye judged the mon by his umbrella, ye'd think he was come tae buy rags."

"Isn't he a character?" laughed Ruth.

"He's as inquisitive as a chippin'-sparrow," said the housekeeper, with some disgust. "He wanted tae know ev'rything that had happened tae ye since ye was weaned."

"Oh, dear! I'm rather glad I wasn't here then."

"Aw, but fash not yerself he'll nae be back. For he wull."

"No!"

"Yes, I tell 't ye. I seen it in the gleam of his hard eye when he went. I gave him nae satisfaction as tae when ye might be home, not knowin' who he was nor what he wanted o' ye."

"Oh, Mrs. MacCall, don't you remember?" and

Ruth recounted the incident at the railroad crossing nearly a month before.

"Huh, that's why he was so cur'ous, then. You saved his life," went on the housekeeper dropping the broad Scotch burr, now that her excitement was cooling.

"I don't know that I did. But perhaps he came to thank me for what I tried to do."

"It seems as though he must want to know every little thing about you," the housekeeper declared. "And how he could corner you with his questions! He should ha' made a lawyer-body. He made me tell him more than I should about the family's private affairs, I have no doot."

"Oh, Mrs Mac! what do you suppose he wants?"

"To see you, belike. And he'll be back again."

"Goodness! I'm not sure I want to talk with him. He looked very odd to me that day I met him. And so cross!"

"No doot of it. He's an ugly looking man. And from his speech it's easy to see he's no friend of womenkind."

"He must be like that Neighbor Cecile was telling us about," sighed Ruth and with that dropped the subject of the strange old man with the green umbrella.

Ruth had heard from Cecile Shepard since she had gone back to the preparatory school—in fact, had received two letters. They were not such bright epistles as Cecile usually wrote; but

they were full of her brother. Not that Cecile mentioned Luke's differences with Neighbor, or the reason thereof; but she seemed unable to keep from writing about Luke.

Ruth was secretly as anxious to hear about the young man as his sister was to write about him.

Ruth was heart-hungry. She felt that Luke might have taken her into his confidence to a greater degree; and yet she suspected why he had not done so.

Mr. Howbridge's talk of dowries for the sisters was always in Ruth's mind. Of course, she knew that the Stower estate was rapidly increasing in value. In a few years property that Peter Stower had purchased for a song would be worth a fortune. The Kenways were likely to be very rich.

What if Luke Shepard had no money when he graduated from college? That seemed a very small thing to Ruth. She would have plenty when she came of age, and why could not her money set Luke up in some line of business that he was fitted for?

Yet, there was a whisper in her heart that told Ruth that was not the right way to begin life. If Luke was ambitious he must find a better way. Nor could she help him, it seemed, in the least, for the young man had given her no right to do so.

"Oh, dear me," Ruth finally decided, "it is awfully hard being a girl—sometimes!"

No such questions and doubts troubled Agnes and Neale. Their course through life seemed a smooth road before them. They told each other their aspirations, and everything they planned to do in the future—that glorious future after school should end—had a part for each in it.

Neale O'Neil did not hope to do anything in life which would shut Agnes out; and the girl's thought marched side-by-side with his intentions. Everything hereafter was to be in partnership.

"For you know, Neale, no matter what Ruth says, I really couldn't get along without you."

"Crickey!" exclaimed the boy, "this old world certainly would be what Unc' Rufus calls 'de valley ob tribulation' if you weren't right here with me."

She smiled upon him gloriously, and used that emphatic ejaculation that always horrified Ruth:

"You bet!"

"You're a good pal, Aggie," said the boy, with feeling.

"And since that morning I first saw you and we both tumbled out of the peach tree," Agnes declared solemnly—"do you remember, Neale?"

"I should say I did!"

"Well, I *thought* you were awfully nice then. *Now,* I know you are."

So, perhaps Agnes and Neale were growing up, too.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MAD DOG SCARE

The primary and grammar grades, and the high school, were in beautiful brick buildings side by side at this end of Milton. The little folk had a large play yard, as well as basement recreation rooms for stormy weather. The Parade Ground was not far away, and the municipality of Milton did not ornament the grass plots there with "Keep Off the Grass" signs.

No automobiles were allowed through the street where the schools were at the hours when the children were going to or coming from school. Besides, two big policemen—the very tallest men on the force—were stationed at the crossings on either side to guide the school children through the danger zone.

However, Tess usually waited for Dot after school so that the smallest Corner House girl should not have to walk home alone. It happened one afternoon during these first few weeks of school, while Tess was waiting with some of her classmates for the smaller girls, that Sammy Pinkney, Iky Goronofsky, and half a dozen other boys of Tess' age, came whooping around from the boys' entrance to the school, chasing a small,

disreputable dog that ran zigzag along the street, acting very strangely.

"Oh, Tess!" cried Alfredia Blossom, the colored girl, "see those boys chasin' that poor dog. I declar'! ain't they jest the wust—"

"Oh, dear me, Alfredia!" urged Tess, gravely, "*do* remember what Miss Shipman tells you. 'Worst,' not 'wust.'"

"I'm gwine to save dat dog!" gasped Alfredia, too disturbed by the circumstances to mind Tess' instructions.

She darted out ahead of the boys. Sammy Pinkney yelled at the top of his voice:

"Let that dog alone, 'Fredia Blossom! You want to catch hydrophobia?"

"Wha' dat?" demanded Alfredia, stopping short and her eyes rolling.

"That dog's mad! If he bites you you'll go mad, too," declared Sammy, coming puffing to the spot where the little girls were assembled.

At this startling statement some of the girls screamed and ran back into the yard. There they met the smaller girls coming forth, and for a time there was a hullabaloo that nearly deafened everybody on the block.

Said Sammy with disgust:

"Hoh! if hollerin' did any good, those girls would kill all the mad dogs in the State."

As it was, the police officer at the corner used his club to kill the unfortunate little animal that had caused all the excitement. The S. P. C. A.

wagon came and got the poor dead dog, and the doctors at the laboratory examined his brain and sent word to the newspapers that the animal had actually been afflicted with rabies.

It was a strange dog; nobody knew where it had come from. It had bitten several other dogs in his course as far as the school. Some of these dogs were sent to the pound to be watched; but some foolish owners would not hear of sacrificing their pets for the general good. So, within a fortnight there was a veritable epidemic of rabies among the dogs of Milton.

One man lost a valuable horse that was impregnated with the poison from being bitten by the stable dog that had been his best friend.

The order went forth that all dogs should be muzzled and none should be allowed on the street save on a leash. Sammy was very careful to keep Buster chained. Buster had not many friends in the neighborhood at best. So Sammy took no chances with his bulldog.

As for Tom Jonah, the old dog was such a universal pet, and was so kindly of disposition that nobody thought of including him in the general fear of the canine dwellers in Milton.

Tom Jonah was old, and had few teeth left. He was troubled now and then with rheumatism, too; and he seldom left the Corner House yard save to accompany the girls on some expedition. He went with them often in the automobile, especially when they went picnicking on Satur-

days. He and Scalawag were very good friends, and sometimes he accompanied the little folks in their afternoon rides around the Parade Ground.

But as soon as the mad-dog scare started the girls were all very careful about letting Tom Jonah go off the premises. He was too old and dignified a dog to run out to bark at passing teams, or to follow strange dogs to make their acquaintance. Therefore the Kenways and Neale O'Neil thought it was not necessary for poor old Tom Jonah to wear an ugly and irritating muzzle all the time. The old fellow hated the thing so!

"I don't blame poor Tom Jonah for not liking to wear that old thing," Dot said thoughtfully. "It's worse than the bit in Scalawag's mouth. And see how Billy Bumps hates to be harnessed up. Supposin'," added the smallest Corner House girl, "*we* had to put on a harness and have our mouths tied up when we started for school. Oh! wouldn't it be dreadful?"

"I guess it would, Dot Kenway," Tess agreed vigorously. "I guess it isn't so much fun being a dog or a horse or even a goat."

"Huh!" growled Sammy who had become pretty well tired of school by this time; "anyway, they don't have to study," and he looked as though he would willingly change places with almost any of the pets about the old Corner House.

Neale always walked to school with the little folks now, for Ruth was fearful that there might be other dogs loose afflicted with the terrible dis-

ease. A panic among little children is so easily started. She could trust Neale to have a watchful care over Dot and Tess.

Nothing so bad as that happened; but there did come a day when tragedy because of the mad-dog scare stalked near to the Corner House.

The dog-catchers were going about town netting all the stray dogs they could find. Foolish people who would not obey the law deserved to lose their pets. And if they wished to, if the dogs were pronounced perfectly healthy at the pound, the owners could appear and claim their pets by paying two dollars.

This last fact, however, was something the little Corner House girls and Sammy Pinkney knew nothing about. They had a horror of "the dog catchers." The collecting agents of the S. P. C. A. are bugbears in most communities. When the children saw the green van, with its screened door in the back, and heard the yapping of the excited dogs within, Dot and Tess stuffed their fingers in their ears and ran.

The children did not understand that stray dogs were likely to be bitten as those other dogs had been by one afflicted with the rabies; and that it was much more humane to catch the unmuzzled animals, that nobody cared for, and dispose of them painlessly, than to have them become diseased and a menace to the neighborhood.

To make the children understand that it was

dangerous to play with strange dogs was a difficult matter. The little Corner House girls were prone to be friendly with passing animals.

All hungry and sore-eyed kittens appealed to Tess and Dot; the wag of a dog's tail was sufficient to interest them in its owner; each horse at the curb held a particular interest, too. They were trusting of nature, these little girls, and they trusted everybody and everything.

In coming home from school one afternoon Neale was in a hurry to do an errand, and he left the little folk at the corner, hurrying around to Con Murphy's on the back street, where he lived. Ruth was away from home and Agnes had not yet arrived at the Corner House.

The Willow Street block, however, seemed perfectly safe. Tess and Dot strolled along the block, their feet rustling the carpet of leaves that had now fallen from the trees. Sammy Pinkney was playing solitaire leapfrog over all posts and hydrants.

Just as they reached the corner of the Corner House yard Tom Jonah heard and saw them. He rose up, barking the glad tidings that his little friends were returning from school, and as he felt pretty well this day, he leaped the fence into the street and came cavorting toward them, laughing just as broadly as a dog could laugh.

Even as Tess and Dot greeted him, Sammy Pinkney emitted a shriek of dismay. A big auto-

van had turned the corner and rolled smoothly along the block. One man on the front seat who was driving the truck said to his mate:

"There's another of 'em, Bill. Net him."

The fellow he spoke to leaped out as the green van came to a halt. He carried a net like a fish seine over his arm. Before the little girls who were fondling Tom Jonah realized that danger threatened—before the frightened Sammy could do more than shout his useless warning—the man threw the net, and old Tom Jonah was entangled in its meshes.

The little girls screamed. Sammy roared a protest. The men paid no attention to the uproar.

"Got a big fish this time, Harry," said Bill, dragging the struggling, growling Tom Jonah to the back of the van. "Give us a hand."

For the big dog, his temper roused, would have done his captor some injury had he been able. The driver of the dog catchers' van drove the other dogs back from the door with a long pole, and then between them he and his mate heaved Tom Jonah into the vehicle.

Sammy Pinkney scurried around for some missile to throw at the dog catchers. The little girls' shrieks brought neighboring children to yards and doors and windows. But there chanced not to be an adult on the block to whom the dog catchers might have listened.

"Oh, Mister! Don't! Don't!" begged Tess,

sobbing, and trying to hold by the coat the man who had netted Tom Jonah. "He's a good dog —a real good dog. *Don't* take him away."

"If you hurt Tom Jonah my sister Ruthie will do something *awful* to you!" declared Dot, too angry to cry.

"Wish my father was home," said Sammy, threateningly. "He'd fix you dog-catchers!"

"Aw-gowan!" exclaimed the man, pushing Tess so hard that she almost fell, and breaking her hold upon his coat.

But Tess forgot herself in her anxiety for Tom Jonah. She bravely followed him to the very step of the van.

"Give him back! Give him back!" she cried. "You must not hurt Tom Jonah. He never did you any harm. He never did *anybody* any harm. Give him back to us! Please!"

Her wail made no impression on the man.

"Drive on, Harry," he said. "These kids give me a pain."

The green van moved on. Tom Jonah's gray muzzle appeared at the screened door at the back. He howled mournfully as the van headed toward Main Street.

"Oh, what shall we do? What shall we do?" cried Tess, wringing her hands.

"Let's run tell Ruthie," gasped Dot.

"I wish Neale O'Neil was here," growled Sammy.

But Tess was the bravest of the three. She

had no intention of losing sight of poor Tom Jonah, whose mournful cries seemed to show that he knew the fate in store for him.

"Where are you going, Tess?" shouted Sammy, as the Corner House girl kept on past the gate of her own dooryard, after the green van.

"They sha'n't have Tom Jonah!" declared the sobbing Tess. "I—I won't let them."

"And—and Iky Goronofsky says that they make frankfurters out of those poor dogs," moaned Dot, repeating a legend prevalent among the rougher school children at that time.

"Pshaw! he was stringin' you kids," said Sammy, with more wisdom, falling in with Dot behind the determined Tess. "What'll we do? Tess is going right after that old van."

"We mustn't leave her," Dot said. "Oh! I *wish* Ruthie had seen those horrid men take Tom Jonah."

As it was there seemed nothing to do but to follow the valiant Tess on her quest toward the dog pound. As for Tess herself she had no intention of losing sight of Tom Jonah. She made up her mind that no matter how far the van went the poor old dog who had been their friend for so long should not be deserted.

At the seashore, soon after Tom Jonah had first come to live with the Corner House girls, the dog had been instrumental in saving the lives of both Tess and Dot. He had often guarded them when they played and when they worked.

They depended upon him at night to keep away prowlers from the Corner House henroost. No ill-disposed persons ever troubled the premises at the Corner of Willow and Main Streets after one glimpse of Tom Jonah.

"I don't care!" sobbed Tess, her plump cheeks streaked with tears, when her little sister and Sammy caught up with her a block away from home. "I don't care. They sha'n't put poor Tom Jonah in the gas chamber. *I* know what they do to poor doggies. They sha'n't treat him so!"

"But what'll you do, Tess?" demanded Sammy, amazed by the determination and courage of his little friend.

"I don't know just what I'll do when I get there but I'll do something—you see if I don't, Sammy Pinkney!" threatened this usually mild and retiring Tess Kenway.

CHAPTER XXIV

IT ENGAGES AUNT SARAH'S ATTENTION

Ruth, as has been said, was away from the house when this dreadful thing happened to Tom Jonah. Uncle Rufus was too lame to have followed the dog catchers' van in any case, had he seen the capture of their pet.

But Mrs. MacCall and Aunt Sarah were sitting together sewing in the latter's big front room over the dining-room of the Corner House. Looking out of the window by which she sat, and biting off a thread reflectively, the housekeeper said:

"It's on my mind, Miss Maltby, that our Ruth is not so chirpy as she used to be."

"She's growing up," said Aunt Sarah. "I'll be glad when they're all grown up." And then she added something that would have quite shocked all four of the Corner House girls. "I'll be glad when they are all grown up, and married, and settled down."

"My certie! but you are in haste, woman," gasped the housekeeper. "And it sounds right-down wicked. Wishing the bairns' lives away."

"Do you realize what it's going to mean—these next four or five years?" snapped Aunt Sarah.

"In what way, Miss Maltby?" asked Mrs. MacCall.

"For us," said Aunt Sarah, nodding emphatically. "We're going to have the house cluttered up with boys and young men who will want to marry my nieces."

"Lawk!" gasped the housekeeper. "Will they be standin' in line, think you? Not but the bonny lassies deserve the best there is—"

"Which isn't saying much when it comes to a choice of *men,*" Aunt Sarah sniffed.

"Well," returned Mrs. MacCall, slowly, "of course there'll be none worthy of the lassies. None who deserves our Ruthie. Yet—I'm thinkin'—that that young laddie that was here now—you know, Miss Maltby. Luke Shepard."

"A likeable boy," admitted Aunt Sarah, and that was high praise from the critical spinster.

"Aye," Mrs. MacCall hastened to say, "a very fine young man indeed. And I am moved to say Ruthie liked him."

"Eh?" exclaimed Aunt Sarah.

"You maybe didn't see it. It was plain to me. They two were very fond of each other. Yes, indeed!"

"My niece *fond* of a boy?" gasped the spinster, bridling.

"Why! were ye not just now speakin' of such a possibeelity?" demanded the housekeeper, and in her surprise, dropping for the moment into broad Scotch. "And they are baith of them old enough tae be thinkin' of matin'. Yes!"

Aunt Sarah still stared in amazement. "Can

it be *that* that seems to have changed Ruth so?" she asked at last.

"You've noticed it?" cried the Scotchwoman.

"Yes. As you have suggested, she seems down-hearted. But why—"

"There's something that went wrong. 'Love's young dream,' as they say, is having a partial eclipse, so it is! I see no letters comin' from that college where the laddie has gone."

"But she hears from Cecile Shepard," said Aunt Sarah. "She reads me extracts from Cecile's letters. A very lively and pleasant girl is Cecile."

"So she is," admitted the housekeeper. "But I'm a sight more interested in the laddie. Why doesn't he write?"

"Why—er—would that be quite the thing, Mrs. MacCall?" asked Aunt Sarah, momentarily losing much of her grimness and seemingly somewhat fluttered by this discussion of Ruth's affair.

" 'Twould be almost necessary, Miss Maltby, I can tell you, if he was a laddie of mine," declared the Scotchwoman vigorously. "I'd no have a sweetheart that was either tongue-tied or unable to write."

"Oh, but you take too much for granted," cried Aunt Sarah.

"My observation tells me the two of them are fair lost on each other. I watched 'em while young Shepard was here. It's true they are young; but they'll never be younger, and it's the

young lovin' and matin' was made for—not for old bodies."

"You—you quite surprise me," said Aunt Sarah.

"You'd best get over your surprise, Miss Maltby," said the very practical housekeeper. "You should have your eyes opened. You should see them together again."

"Why not?" demanded Aunt Sarah, suddenly.

"Why not what?"

"Let the children have Cecile and her brother here for over Sunday—for a week end. Let them give a little party. I am sure I loved parties when I was a young girl and lived at this Corner House, when mother was alive."

"It's a good idea," said the housekeeper. "I'll make some layer cakes for the party. We'll not need to go to the expense of a caterer—"

She would have gone on immediately planning for the affair had she not, on glancing through the window, seen the dog catchers' green van rattling over the crossing of Main Street.

"There's those dog catchers!" she exclaimed. "I wonder if Tom Jonah's safe. There are some children running and crying after it—they've lost a pet I've no doubt."

Then suddenly she sprang to her feet.

"Miss Maltby!" she cried. " 'Tis our Tess and Dot—and Sammy Pinkney, the little scamp! It must be either his bulldog or old Tom Jonah those pestilent men have caught."

Aunt Sarah had very good eyes indeed. She had already spied the party and she could see in the back of the van.

"It is Tom Jonah!" she exclaimed. "They must be stopped. How dared those men take our dog?"

Mrs. MacCall, who had no shoes on, could not hurry out. But Aunt Sarah was dressed for company as she always was in the afternoon. She amazed the sputtering housekeeper by stopping only to throw a fleecy hood over her hair before hurrying out of the front door of the Corner House.

Aunt Sarah Maltby seldom left the premises save for church on Sunday. She did not even ride much in the girls' motor-car. She had made up her mind that an automobile was an unnecessary luxury and a "new-fangled notion" anyway; therefore she seldom allowed herself to be coaxed into the car.

She never went calling, claiming vigorously that she was "no gadabout, she hoped." It was an astonishing sight, therefore, to see her marching along Willow Street in the wake of the crying, excited children, who themselves followed in the wake of the dog catchers' van.

The van traveled so fast that Tess and Dot and Sammy could scarcely keep it in sight; while the children were so far ahead of Aunt Sarah that the old woman could not attract their attention when she called.

It was a most embarrassing situation, to say the least. To add to its ridiculousness, Mrs. MacCall met Agnes as she came in swinging her books, and told her at the side door what had happened.

Agnes flung down her books and "hoo-hooed" with all her might for Neale O'Neil. As soon as he answered, sticking his head out of his little bedroom window under the eaves of Con Murphy's cottage, Agnes left the housekeeper and the excited Finnish girl to explain the difficulty to Neale, while she ran after Aunt Sarah.

Soon, therefore, there was a procession of excited Corner House folk trailing through the Milton Streets to the pound. Sammy and the two little girls trotting on behind the dog catchers' van; then Aunt Sarah Maltby, looking neither to right nor left but appearing very stern indeed; then Agnes running as hard as she could run; followed by Neale at a steady lope.

The boy soon overtook his girl chum.

"What under the canopy are we going to do?" he demanded.

"Save Tom Jonah!" declared Agnes, her cheeks blazing.

"The kids are going to do that," chuckled Neale in spite of his shortness of breath. "Guess we'd better save Aunt Sarah, hadn't we?"

"Goodness, Neale!" giggled Agnes, "they won't try to shut *her* up in the pound I should hope."

They did not overtake the determined woman

before she was in sight of the dog refuge. The van had driven into the yard. Before the gate could be shut Tess, followed closely by the trembling Dot and by the more or less valiant Sammy, pushed through likewise and faced the superintendent of the lost dog department.

"What do you little folks want?" asked this kindly man, smiling down upon the trio.

"We want Tom Jonah," said Tess, her voice quivering but her manner still brave.

"You've just got to give us Tom Jonah," Dot added, gulping down a sob.

"You bet you have!" said Sammy, clenching his fists.

"'Tom Jonah'?" repeated the man. "Is that a dog?"

Tess pointed. There was Tom Jonah at the screened door of the van.

"That's him," she said. "He never did anybody any harm. These men just *stole* him."

That was pretty strong language for Tess Kenway to use; but she was greatly overwrought.

"You mean they took him out of your yard?"

"They took him off'n the street," said Sammy. "But he'd only jumped the fence because he saw us comin' home from school."

"He isn't muzzled," said the man.

"He—he don't bite," wailed Dot. "He—he ain't got any teeth to bite!"

He was an old dog as the superintendent could see. Besides, he knew that his men were more

eager to secure the fines than they were to be kind or fair to the owners of dogs.

"How about this, Harry?" he asked the driver of the van.

"The dog's ugly as sin," growled the man. "Ain't he, Bill?"

"Tried to chew me up," declared the man with the net.

"Say!" blurted out Sammy, "wouldn't *you* try to chew a feller up if he caught you in a fish-net and dragged you to a wagon like that? Huh!"

Harry burst out laughing. The superintendent said, quietly:

"Let the big dog out."

"Not me, Boss," said Bill, backing away. "That dog's got it in for me."

"Let me!" exclaimed Tess. "Tom Jonah would not bite any of us—not even if he had hydrophobia. No, sir!"

"Of course he wouldn't!" acclaimed Dot. "But he couldn't have hydro—hydro— Well, whatever that is."

"Keep those other dogs back, Bill, and let the little girl have her Tom Jonah," said the superintendent. "I guess there's been a mistake. These are the Corner House girls, and that is their old dog. I remember him. He wouldn't harm a fly."

"No. But he'd chaw the leg off'n me, Boss," said Bill, who did not like dogs and therefore

was afraid of them. "Besides, all's fish that comes into *my* net, you know."

"Go away," commanded the other man, taking the long pole himself. "I will let him out."

"Oh, Tom Jonah!" cried Tess, running to the door of the van. "Be good now. The man is going to let you out and we will take you home."

The old dog stopped whining but he did not, as Sammy whispered to Dot, look any too pleasant. When the superintendent opened the door, after crowding back the smaller dogs that filled the van, Tess called to Tom Jonah to come out. He leaped down. The next instant he whirled and would have charged the two men who had caused him such discomfort and disgrace, his jaws emitting terrific growls.

"Stop, Tom Jonah!" from Tess and Dot, and "Cut it out, Tom Jonah!" from Sammy, were all that saved the day. The dog had never yet been cowed of spirit and, old as he was, he would have attacked a lion, let alone a pair of faint-hearted rowdies.

"Take my advice, boys," said the superintendent of the pound. "Don't go around that block by the old Corner House again. This old fellow will not forget either of you."

"He ought to be shot," growled Bill.

"You do such a thing—such a desperately wicked thing!" exclaimed a sharp voice, "and I will see that you are prosecuted to the full extent of the law."

It was Aunt Sarah who appeared like an angel of wrath at the gateway.

"Mr. Howbridge shall know about your actions —you two men there! And as for you," the indignant old woman added, fixing her gaze upon the superintendent of the pound, "let me tell you that the Stower estate makes a contribution yearly to your Society, which contribution partly pays your salary. I hold *you* responsible for the character of the men you engage to collect the poor dogs who are neglected and who have no homes. They are not supposed to take the pets of people who amply care for dumb animals. Another occasion like this and you will hear from it—mark my word, sir!"

"Oh, my!" sighed Dot, afterward, her eyes still round with wonder, "I never did suppose Aunt Sarah could speak so big. Isn't she just wonnerful?"

While the children were caressing Tom Jonah and the superintendent was striving to pacify the indignant Aunt Sarah, Agnes and Neale came panting to the pound.

"Guess it's all over but the shouting," said Neale, with satisfaction. "Down, Tom Jonah! Down, with you! Don't jump all over my best suit of clothes."

"And spare me your kisses, good old fellow!" begged Agnes. "We know just how glad you are to get out of jail. Who wouldn't be?"

"Je-ru-sa-*lem!*" ejaculated Sammy Pinkney;

"who'd ha' thought of Tom Jonah getting pinched?"

Before the party got away from the pound, Ruth came racing down in the automobile. Returning from her first drive alone as a licensed chauffeur, she had heard of the family's migration to the pound and had come in haste to the rescue of Tom Jonah—and the remainder of the Corner House party.

"For goodness' sake! do get into the automobile and act as though we'd just come for a ride," exclaimed the oldest Corner House girl. "Did ever any one hear of such ridiculous things as happen to us?"

"You need not be so snippy," said Agnes, in some heat. "If Tom Jonah had actually been put into that awful gas chamber they tell about—"

"They don't do such things until it is positive that nobody will claim the dog—unless he really is afflicted with rabies," Ruth said. "I'm surprised at Aunt Sarah."

"You needn't be, young lady," said Miss Maltby. "You needn't be surprised at anything I may do. I have long known that I belonged to a family of crazy people, and now I guess I've proved myself as crazy as any of you."

However, they could laugh at it after a while. And they did not begrudge any trouble to save poor old Tom Jonah from inconvenience. While the children were away at school thereafter they

were careful to put the old dog on a long leash in a shady corner of the yard.

After all, Tom Jonah had been a vagabond for a good part of his life, and old as he was sometimes the spirit of what Agnes called "the wanderlust" (she was just beginning German) came over him and he would go away to visit friends for two or three days at a time.

"He'll go visiting no more at present," Ruth said with decision.

However, other plans for visiting progressed. Aunt Sarah and Mrs. MacCall proceeded to carry out their conspiracy. The suggestion was made at just the right time, and in the right way, for Cecile and Luke to be invited to the old Corner House for a week-end party, and the party itself was planned.

So it came to pass that Cecile Shepard wrote her brother Luke that very next week:

"I suppose, Luke dear, you have received your invitation to Ruth's party. Of course, dear boy, we must both go. I would not disappoint or offend her for the world—nor must you. Buck up, old pal! This is a hard row to hoe, but I guess you'll have to hoe it alone. I can only sit on the fence and root for you.

"Aunt Lorena declares the world is coming to an end. Neighbor sent Samri over to the house to ask Auntie what Ruth's last name was and

how to find her. He was so mad with you that night you told him, he evidently did not catch her name. And then, Aunt Lorena says, the very next morning Neighbor started out and was gone all day.

"He could not have gone to see Ruth. Of course not! Certain sure if he had, I should have heard of it from either Ruth herself or from Agnes. But he *might* have gone to Milton to make inquiries about her.

"However, I am afraid whatever he did that day he was away, it did not please him. He returned about dark, blew up Samri in the yard for some little thing, rampaged around in his most awful way, and finally, Aunt Lorena says, she could hear him scolding the butler all through dinner and half the evening. Then, she believes, the poor old Jap crept into the toolshed to spend the rest of the night out of sound of his master's voice."

Luke would certainly not have gone to Milton and to the Corner House at this time save that he, like his sister, could not offend those who had been so kind to him there. And he was hungry for a sight of Ruth!

Seeing her, he feared, would not aid him to be manly and put his desires aside while he fought his way through college. He knew that Neighbor would do exactly what he had said. Never could he look to the old gentleman for a friendly word,

or a bit of help over a hard financial place again. As Mr. Henry Northrup was so fond of saying, he always said what he meant and meant what he said!

The party was to be on Saturday evening, and the Friday when the Shepards had promised to arrive at the Corner House came, and Luke and Cecile went their separate ways to Milton by train. As he had not sent word by just what train he would arrive the young man did not expect anybody to meet him. He walked up from the station with his suitcase and came in sight of the old Corner House without being spied by anybody on the premises.

A wintry wind was blowing, and the great shade trees about the house were almost bare of leaves. Yet the Stower homestead could never look anything but cheerful and homelike. Luke quickened his pace as he approached the gate. There was somebody inside that old house, he was quite sure, whom he longed desperately to see.

He opened the gate and swung up the walk to the door. Bounding up the steps he reached forth his hand to touch the annunciator button when he caught sight of something standing on the porch beside the door—something that brought a gasp of amazement from his lips and actually caused him to turn pale.

CHAPTER XXV

LOOKING AHEAD

Ruth had become quite excited over the prospect of the coming party. Of course, not as excited as Agnes, but sufficiently so to become more like her oldtime self.

She went about with a smile on her lips and a gleam in her eyes that had been missing of late. Agnes hinted that she must have some particular reason for being so "chipper."

"Somebody's coming you like, Ruthie Kenway!" the next oldest sister declared.

For once Ruth did not deny the accusation. She merely blushed faintly and said nothing.

Friday afternoon was a particularly busy time for Ruth. She found some things had been forgotten and she went down town to attend to them. She walked, and in coming back, hastening up Main Street, at the corner of the avenue that gave a glimpse of the railroad station, she came face to face with the queer old gentleman of the green umbrella!

"Ha!" ejaculated the old man, stopping abruptly. "So! I find you at last, do I?"

"Ye-yes, sir," stammered Ruth.

To tell the truth, he looked so fierce, he had

such a hawklike eye, and he spoke so harshly that he fairly frightened the oldest Corner House girl. She felt as though he must think she had been hiding from him purposely.

"I was in your town here once before looking for you. You were not to be found," he said.

"Ye-yes, sir," admitted Ruth. "I guess I was out that day."

"Out? I didn't know where to hunt for you," growled the old man, shaking the green umbrella and looking as fierce, Ruth thought, as though he might like to shake her in the same way.

"Ye-yes, sir," she stammered.

"Don't say that again!" roared the stranger. "Speak sensibly. Or are you as big a fool as most other females?"

At that Ruth grew rather piqued. She regained her self-possession and began to study the old man.

"I'm not sure how foolish you consider all women to be, sir," she said. "Perhaps I am merely an average girl."

"No. I'll be bound you've more sense than some," he grumbled. "Otherwise you wouldn't have pulled me back from that train. I'd have been run over like enough."

"I'm glad you think I helped you," said Ruth simply.

"Heh? What are you glad for?"

"Because I like to have people feel grateful to me and like me," confessed Ruth frankly.

"Hey-day!" exclaimed the old gentleman. "Here's plainness of speech. I suppose you think I am rich and that I have come to reward you?"

"I thought you had come to thank me, not insult me," the girl said, with dignity. "You cannot give me money."

"You are a wealthy girl, then?"

"We have all the money we shall ever need," said Ruth. "It really does not matter, does it, sir? If you have thanked me sufficiently, I will go on."

"Hoity-toity!" he snarled. "You are one of these very smart modern girls, I see. And wealthy, too? Where do you live?"

"I am going home now, sir. You know where I live," said Ruth in surprise.

"Heh? I'll go with you. I want to talk with your folks."

"I really do not understand your object. I have no parents, sir," said Ruth, a little angry by this time. "If you wish to see our lawyer—"

"Haven't you anybody?"

"I have sisters and an aunt and a guardian—our lawyer," said Ruth not at all pleased to be obliged to satisfy the curiosity of the old man with the green umbrella.

He walked on beside her and there really seemed no way to escape him. She thought it strange that he cared to come to the house again, having

already been there once and interviewed Mrs. MacCall.

When they came in sight of the old Corner House Ruth heard the old gentleman utter an exclamation as though he recognized it. Then, when she stopped at the gate he demanded:

"So you live here?"

"Of course I do," Ruth replied rather sharply for her.

She opened the gate and passed through. She did not ask him to enter; but he came in just the same, green umbrella and all. He walked beside her up the path and up the steps to the door. Then as she turned to face him he grumbled:

"So I suppose you're going to tell me that you are Ruth Kenway?"

"That is my name, sir."

"Humph! So, the boy *has* got some sense, after all," muttered the old man.

Ruth suddenly felt that there was a deep meaning in the old man's look and a reason for his curiosity. She asked faintly:

"What boy, sir? Whom do you mean?"

"That whippersnapper, Lake Shepard."

"Oh!" Ruth exclaimed. *"You are Neighbor!"*

So that is why Luke, coming half an hour later to this very front door, spied the green umbrella and Mr. Henry Northrup's great overshoes standing together on the porch of the old Corner House.

Luke did not know at first whether it would be best to ring the bell or to run. He wavered for several minutes, undecided. Then suddenly Neale O'Neil, rounding the corner of the house, caught sight of him.

"Hullo!" shouted the ex-circus boy. "Lost, strayed, or stolen? The girls have been looking for you. Your sister is here already."

"Sh!" whispered Luke, beckoning frantically. "Somebody else is here, too."

"Crickey, yes! You know the old chap? Northrup's his name. He looks as hard as nails, but our Ruth's got him feeding out of her hand already. Oh, Ruth is some charmer!"

Luke fairly fell up against Neale.

"Charmed Neighbor?" he gasped. "Then Aunt Lorena's right! The world *is* coming to an end."

Of course, it did not! At least, not just then. But when Luke presented himself in the sitting-room of the old Corner House and found Mr. Northrup and Ruth in quiet conversation, the young man felt that he must be walking in a dream.

"You here, Neighbor?" he said, rather shakingly.

"Why, yes," said Mr. Northrup calmly. "You see, Miss Ruth is rather a friend of mine. Ahem! At least, she did me a favor some time ago, and in hunting her up to thank her, I find that she is a very dear friend of your sister and yourself, Luke."

"Er—yes?" questioned Luke, still a little tremulous in his speech.

"Ahem!" said Mr. Northrup again, staring hard at the young man. "Your friend Miss Ruth has invited me to remain to dinner and meet her sisters and—ahem!—the rest of her family. I hope you have no objection, Luke?" with sarcasm.

"Oh, no, Neighbor! Oh, no, indeed!" Luke hastened to say.

To the amazement of Luke and Cecile Shepard Mr. Northrup appeared very well indeed at dinner that night in the Corner House. They learned he could be very entertaining if he wished; that he had not forgotten how to interest women if he had been a recluse for so long; and that even Tess and Dot found something about him to admire. The former said afterward that Mr. Northrup had a voice like a distant drum; Dot said he had a "noble looking forehead," meaning that it was very high and bald.

Mr. Northrup and Aunt Sarah were wonderfully polite to each other. Mrs. MacCall had her suspicions of the old gentleman, remembering the umbrella and the occasion of his first call when, she considered, he had entered the house under false pretenses.

Luke went to the evening train with his old friend, and Mr. Northrup's mellowed spirit remained with him—for the time at least.

"She is a smart girl, Luke. I always thought

you had a little good sense in your makeup, and I believe you've proved it. But remember, boy," added the man, shaking an admonitory finger at him, "remember, you're to stick to your fancy. No changing around from one girl to another. If you dare to I'll disown you—I'll disown you just as I said I should if you hadn't picked out the girl you have."

"Good gracious, Neighbor!" gasped the young man, "I—I don't even know if Ruth will have me."

"Huh! You don't? Well, young man," said the old gentleman in disgust at Luke's dilatoriness, *"I do!"*

Perhaps Mr. Henry Northrup's very positiveness upon this point spurred Luke to find an opportunity during this week-end visit to the old Corner House to open his heart to Ruth. In return the girl was frank enough to tell him just how glad she was that he had acted as he had before knowing that Neighbor would approve.

"For of course, Luke, money doesn't have to enter the question at all. Nevertheless, I know you will desire to be established in some business before we are really *serious* about this thing."

"Serious, Ruth!" exclaimed the young man. "Well—I don't know. Seems to me I've never been really serious about anything in my life before."

Though she spoke so very cautiously about their understanding, Ruth Kenway sent Luke back to

college Sunday evening knowing that she coincided with his plans and hopes perfectly.

The party on Saturday night—the first of several evening entertainments the girls gave that winter—was a very delightful gathering. The visitors from out of town enjoyed themselves particularly because the bugbear of Neighbor's opposition to Luke's desires had been dissipated.

"Lucky boy, Luke," his sister told him. "And you may thank Ruthie Kenway for your happiness in more senses than one. It was she who charmed your crochety old friend. No other girl could have done it."

"Don't you suppose I know that?" he asked her, with scorn.

That party, of course, was enjoyable for the smaller Corner House girls as well as for their elders. There was nothing really good that Tess and Dot ever missed if Ruth and Agnes had it in their power to please their smaller sisters.

"It's most as good as having a party of our very own," sighed Tess, as she and Dot and Sammy Pinkney sat at the head of the front stairs with plates of ice cream and cake in their small laps.

"It's better," declared Dot. " 'Cause we can just eat and eat and not have to worry whether the others are getting enough."

"Why, Dot Kenway!" murmured Tess. "That sounds awful—awful piggish."

"Nop," said Sammy. "She's right, Tess.

You see, Dot means that she really can have a better time if there isn't anything to worry about. Now, there was that day we went off and took a ride on that canalboat."

"Being pirates," put in Dot, with a reminiscent sigh.

"Yep," went on the philosophic Sammy. "We'd have had an awful nice day if there'd been nothing to worry us. Wouldn't we, Dot?"

"I—I guess so," agreed the smallest Corner House girl slowly. "But just the same, Sammy Pinkney, I'm never going to run off to be pirates with you again. Ruthie says it isn't ladylike," she finished with an air of "be it ever so painful, ladylike I must be."

"Humph!" sniffed Sammy, "you won't get another chance. I ain't going to take any girl pirating when I go again. I don't want girls on a pirate ship."

"Oh, Sammy!" said Dot, "you sound just like that Mr. Neighbor Northrup. You know, Mr. Luke's friend. The misogynist."

"Huh!" grunted Sammy, scowling.

"But—but," Tess questioned softly, "Mr. Northrup's cured of that disease, isn't he?"

THE END